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Hristo Boev

FEMININE SELVES IN SYLVIA PLATH'S PROSE AND POETRY THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMPARED LIVED EXPERIENCE IN FICTION



УНИВЕРСИТЕТСКО ИЗДАТЕЛСТВО
"ЕПИСКОП КОНСТАНТИН ПРЕСЛАВСКИ"

HRISTO BOEV

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Университетско издателство „Епископ Константин Преславски“ Шумен
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© Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction, Title

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FEMININE SELVES IN SYLVIA PLATH'S PROSE AND POETRY: THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMPARED LIVED EXPERIENCE IN FICTION

Can death be sleep, when life is but a dream,
And scenes of bliss pass as a phantom by?
The transient pleasures as a vision seem,
And yet we think the greatest pain's to die.
How strange it is that man on earth should roam,
And lead a life of woe, but not forsake
His rugged path; nor dare he view alone
His future doom which is but to awake.

Keats

« Vivre » est un infinitif fini.

Pascal du Duve

A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line

Conrad

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2021

Table of Abbreviations

The Journals of Sylvia Plath	(*J*)
Sylvia Plath's Letters	(*L*)
The Bell Jar	(*BJ*)
Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams	(*JP*)
Restored Ariel	(*RA*)
Collected Poems	(*CP*)

Acknowledgements

In times when the world is going through a global pandemic, the first in the last 100 years with consequences for just about every single inhabitant on the planet, and when online classes have largely replaced regular on-site classes, hopefully for as long as the pandemic lasts and not more, there could hardly be a more agreeable time for writing a monograph. With the long hours spent at home in front of the laptop where digitized specimens of World Literature become instantly available, after the necessary number of mouse clicks, and the image of Henry James looming large, inviting us to tea or coffee, depending on the personal preference, we should be just a step away from conceptualizing the material. In my case, I got immersed in the works by authors who have always meant a lot to me – from America and from our region – the Balkans, and the intense perusal of their creations has led to the idea of the present work with an accent on Sylvia Plath and the 1950s in the USA. Engaging as they are, comparative studies are demanding, tend to get voluminous and exact nothing short of the best from the analyst. In the work-at-hand, based on close readings and culturological discussions referring to literatures from different epochs and continents, I have many a time burned the midnight oil and am happily using the occasion to thank those who were so kind to do the same by taking from their precious time closely reading this monograph, and namely associate professor Svetlana Nedelcheva, associate professor Desislava Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva and associate professor Irina Ivanova. My thanks also go to associate professor Ludmila Martanovschi for her pertinent comments on the work at the very initial stage. Likewise, I extend my thanks to professor Ludmilla Kostova and professor Snezhana Boycheva who have added competence to the attention to detail throughout and whose advice has been invaluable. I would also like to thank all the members of the Department of English Studies at Shumen University for their support.

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Preface by the Author

Sylvia Plath is such a well-known household name that almost everyone seems to have heard of her and knows that she was an American poet. When I say this, I do not only mean the people in America or England, but elsewhere since she produced striking poetry that simply left people stunned, marveling at her true poetic genius even in translation. She also wrote prose and her novel *The Bell Jar* is considered by many to be a worthy feminine counterpart of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in capturing the rebel spirit of the 1950s in the USA. Yet it is rather unfortunate that the interest she provokes in the wide reading public derives mainly from the fact that she committed suicide by putting her head in a gas oven while leaving her two children asleep in the adjacent room. And that alone qualifies this interest as morbid and the poet as moribund. The truth is that Sylvia Plath was not always clinically depressive and did not only write often disturbing poetry. She was an accomplished and versatile writer of prose as well – with more than 70 short stories to her credit, one finished novel and at least one (several started) unfinished, if we are to believe her husband, the English poet laureate, Ted Hughes, who claims that the manuscript of the latter disappeared in the 1970s – 7 years after her premature death in 1963 (according to Plath's mother there were two unfinished ones). She also wrote a massive bulk of letters (more than 1390 collected in two volumes) to various recipients, and they are as significant in reconstructing a fuller picture of her artistic personality as are Keats's. Furthermore, her *Journals* are yet another indispensable read in glimpsing into the everyday life and creative laboratory of the poet. Again, contrary to general perception, her poetry does not always require an age or gender discretion to be experienced adequately although it remains constantly provoking. While it is largely considered to be confessional, with this study I shall prove that the different selves speaking in both her prose and poetry encompass a broader spectrum of emotions and ideas which cannot be confined to one single funereal trend and which resist an exhaustive categorization, defying standards

of reception and acceptance. Plath's works, prose, or poetry, remain undeniably very intimate and have been speaking directly to the readers over the years that have passed since the time of writing; thus, through this text, they will be speaking to us yet again in their nonconformist ways.

My personal interest in Plath dates to the times I was a student of English Philology in the distant late 1990s and when I discovered some of her most popular poems in an edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* – one of the beloved students' anthologies for my generation. I remember casually leafing through the cigarette thin pages when I stumbled upon "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus", "Never Try to Trick Me with a Kiss", "Tulips", "Mad Girl's Love Song". It was sometime later that I read *The Bell Jar* and stunned by its bold transgressive femininity reminiscent of the tone of the *Ariel* poems, I felt I needed to know her works in depth; another fascinating discovery was that her college thesis was on Dostoyevsky, one of my favorite writers. Yet it is all very well for one to like a writer and even admire that writer because they resonate powerfully with that author due to a chord that was vibrating in the same frequency once. It is one thing to discover a poet that meant a lot to one at the impressionable age of twenty at university, and quite another to read that poet again twenty years later. This is generally the problem with writers like Mayne Reid, Jack London, or Mario Puzo for that matter – they may appeal to the reader with the sheer power of captivating a not sufficiently experienced in the great literature critical self. If one wants to write on them, say 20 years later, some of their literary imperfections strike one as clearly visible while upon the first meeting, one may only have had the sensation that there was probably something amiss there. Will it be the same with Plath? This is a pertinent question to ask since her wide popularity with the public does not seem to reflect fully a similar engagement on part of the critics although critical interest is on the rise. After all, Plath is by far not just a popular poet and a feminist icon, she has gained significant critical attention, especially since the 1970s. The likelihood that she will hold a similar sway over me now is not to be underestimated, and I think we should agree that there is beauty in imperfection. As Plath herself said it, "the worst thing is the death of the imagination". A perfect poem, story or novel is not unlike those notorious wines that leave one nothing

to hope for. We could even make the argument that slightly imperfect works of literature are like those uncut diamonds that will shine more brightly, if observed at the right angle, than the impeccable crystal staring in your face. Let us not forget that even greats such as Keats grew in appreciation over time; as for Plath's works, they currently show a continuous critical division of admirers and detractors, which also applies to certain aspects of her personality. Indeed, with Plath, life and works seem to be indivisible and both have been the subject of controversies to be explored here in their overt provocation as often dissenting feminine selves. Since her writing was almost always highly autobiographical, she compares to authors not only in America but also on the other side of the Atlantic. I hereby propose an exploration of her literary creations in comparison to those of writers from America and from our region (the Balkans) with the aim to establish universality in both herself and the locals. The main writers to be considered share with Plath a strong preference for writing from personal experience, two out of the three took their own lives and all had occasional or frequent encounters with depression. These are the American Anne Sexton, the Bulgarian Petya Dubarova and the Romanian Cella Serghi with only the last one reaching an advanced age.

For a short life of 30 years and the bulk of her writings – poems, short stories, novel, journals, and letters, Plath can safely be likened to her great predecessors – the English romantics of 19th century, Byron, Keats, and Shelley, in both impressive literary production and tragic untimely demise. Happily, the general interest in her works is also reflected in a growing academic interest and researchers from all over the globe are continuously coming up with new critical finds in a poet who left the world too young. The following pages will allow us to experience the sheer power of Plath's texts by closely reading a representative selection of them in the proposed comparison to writers whose works are just as fascinating.

Hristo Boev

INTRODUCTION

1. General considerations

Literary studies have, over the last 50 years, utilized numerous interdisciplinary perspectives since fiction is generally accepted to be an imitation of life, or, paradoxically, "life imitates art", as Wilde famously put it. Several kindred or distant human sciences have consequently been considered appropriate in rendering additional depth and rigor to discussing socio-bio-economic realities and gendered selves. In doing so, many have departed from the literary text, emphasis being given to the extraliterary discourse of the proposed aspects. While there is nothing essentially wrong with that since literature imitates life in all its manifestations, which is possibly also true vice versa, I am convinced that such research will benefit greatly from an approach which stays close to the literary text and highlights certain passages from that text not only to make its point, but also to give credit to the passages and the authors themselves, thus allowing the reader to partake of the analysis with emphatical insightful glimpses into the very core of the discussion. The need for this closeness to the text is manifold and it does not stem from the fact that Plath was above all a poet. I believe Shelley was right when in his "A Defence of Poetry" qualified the distinction between poets and writers of prose "a vulgar error" (Shelley). In fact, Plath's texts, prose, or poetry, are almost in their entirety poetic. It is rather the engaging intimate nature of her writings, oftentimes hypnotic, that requires an unwavering closer look and highly sharpened senses of reception. And that to the point that Harold Bloom wrote one of his most unusual "Introductions" to his series on modern critical views concerning Plath. In it he declares himself unable to "describe and analyze a power of *transformation*[1]" (4), which he associates with hers and Adrienne Rich's poetry. He questions Plath's greatness and originality and announces the call for "a new aesthetic", which should "come down upon us" (5). Furthermore, others have

[1] Emphasis given by the author of the study. – a. n.

expressed their disagreement with Plath's "narcissism". Bruce Bawer, for example, laments *Ariel*'s perceived "self-display" and "morbid absorption in and superficial celebration of the poet's own sensitivity and imagined victimhood" (17). Critics like Al Alvarez, by contrast, speak of Plath in glowing terms, accentuating her poetic innovations and interpretive possibilities. Since the critical appreciation of Plath's works is still divided, they remain welcoming for new studies, employing different perspectives and approaches. What is the role of criticism when we are to consider both an author whose life ended tragically and the abruptly curbed process of her writing, though? The answer Joyce Carol Oates provides to this question about artists in general and Plath in particular, I believe, we can all adopt not because of its apparent tolerance, but because of its comprehensive sensitivity to the issue, as well as the critical prospects it unfolds:

> That the autobiographical personality is presented by the artist as a testing of reality, and that its success or failure or bewilderment will ultimately condition the artist's personal life; that the degree to which an audience accepts or rejects or sympathetically detaches itself from a given tragic action will ultimately condition the collective life of an era; and that the function of literary criticism is not simply to dissect either cruelly or reverentially, to attack or to glorify, but to illustrate how the work of a significant artist helps to explain his era and our own. The significance of Plath's art is assumed. Her significance as a cultural phenomenon is assumed. What needs desperately to be seen is how she performed for us, and perhaps in place of some of us, the concluding scenes in the fifth act of a tragedy, the first act of which began centuries ago (207).

Starting from Bloom's conundrum and with regards to Oates's concern, my proposal is for yet another reading revelatory of the feminine self in the process of being transformed, transgressing certain boundaries, norms, and stereotypes, but also conforming to others, thus hoping to help build this "aesthetic" – critical reception based on performance which can only appear from multiple intimate experiences with confessional texts by Plath and by others. My aim is to prove that the self-scrutiny of Plath's later *Ariel* and the 1963 poems as well as the symbolic grimness of her earlier ones from *The Colossus* and caustic sarcasm in the ones under *Juvenilia*, while attesting to the poet's inner turmoil and darker outlook on life, in fact, offer, together with her more

varied in tone prose (novel, short stories, notes, journals and letters), multiple perspectives into reading femininity in all stages of a woman's life, thus containing a wide well deserved universal appeal.

The advantages of such a text-based approach, I believe, also address a concern expressed by Frieda Hughes, Sylvia Plath's daughter, who from the "Forward" to the restored version of *Ariel* (2004)[2] warns: "Since she died my mother has been dissected, analyzed, reinterpreted, reinvented, fictionalized, and in some cases completely fabricated. It comes down to this: her own words describe her best, her ever-changing moods defining the way she viewed her world" (*RA* xviii). Although one could as well forego this warning claiming that the texts exist by themselves and if subjected to this or that analytical method, they will render results valid for the respective method, comparable to renditions from similar methods, or, if taken in a broader context, they will *seem* to fit this or that culturological picture, we come to the metaphysical: "seeming is believing". And from here it would not appear far-fetched to get to the perceptual: "seeing is believing", only it would be done through imaginative intentionality, not the actual senses. In the case of Sylvia Plath and her works compared to other writers' lived experience in fiction, I would rather opt for the second right away also because there are differences in the critical evaluation of these authors on a national and international level. Even if there were no critical evaluations at all on any one of them still an author might be worthy of analysis since he or she may have achieved independence from the nation of origin as literary presence in the world (Casanova 15, 39). With these in mind, I will present the approach I have chosen in my discussion of Plath's texts as compared lived experience in fiction, continuing with further reasoning.

In the constant search of new investigative perspectives, of invaluable help in supplying (literary) experience, as ever-changing aesthetics, have been the spatial theories exploring space over time featuring a plethora of renowned explorers of spaces – Lefebvre, Sansot, de Certeau, Bachelard, Soja, and more recently, Westphal with his proposed geocentric approach in *Pour une approche géocritique des*

[2] All in-text mentions are of the year of publishing, not the actual year of the edition used in the study, which is given in the bibliography section. – a. n.

textes. The latter came to be known as Geocriticism and it neatly incorporates geography and sociology among others as creditable kindred disciplines. The approach has had notable followers such as Robert Tally and Eric Prieto who have been able to write critically about literary places with the well-grounded conviction that there is a promising theory behind their studies[3]. An approach, which allows close textual readings not disconnected from spatiality, is the *phenomenological* one – an exploration of the third space in Edward Soja's "trialectic of space"[4] – *l'espace vécu* (lived space). Certain elements of phenomenology are almost always used partially or throughout a literary analysis without being specifically identified e.g., consciousness, agency, and imagination. There are numerous articles that delineate these possibilities such as: "Phenomenological Perspectives in Literary Criticism" by Amir Mahdavi Zafarghandi et al where the authors synthesize a modern understanding of phenomenology and namely: "[it] studies the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity" (55) – under Husserl's *intentionality*, which, applied to literature, would be the author's consciousness and, if applied to the action in the literary text, would be an analysis of agency or linguistic expression. They also recall studies of the act of reading as a phenomenon and point out well established differences between fictional and non-fictional texts (56-7), concluding that, "although phenomenology is a philosophical school of thought, it can have extensive implications for literature" (60). Good critical references demonstrating these implications in practice are: Maurice Natanson's *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* which draws upon the power of fiction to highlight aspects of experience otherwise

[3] The author of the present study has produced two works based on a geocritical approach: *Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos: Similarities, Differences, Continuities* (2013) and *The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars* (orig. title: *Различната Добруджа в литературата между войните*) (2020). – a. n.

[4] Discussed in *Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City* in reference to urbanity: the first space is the physical space; the second is the perceived cognitive/ mental representation of space while the third is the actually lived experience (26). – a. n.

unexamined, or with a more global scope, Marlies Kronegger's *Phenomenology and Aesthetics: Approaches to Comparative Literature and Other Arts*, Thomas R. Simon's *Being and the Imaginary: An Introduction to Aesthetic Phenomenology and English Literature from the Eighteenth Century to Romanticism*, and, as in this case, applied to a single author, David Halliburton's *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View*.

Another point of theoretical reference in this work is the representation of *self* in Plath's texts. The self is commonly associated with psychological, developmental, and behavioral patterns and dimensions. It also has "descriptive and evaluative components" (Lipka & Brinthaupt 3) which will be important for this study, namely its self-conception and self-evaluation. Other essentials include binary oppositions such as "self-as-object" vs "self-as-subject", "stability vs "change". Last, but not least, is its stance as regards appurtenance to the ego, personality, identity, consciousness, and possibly even the soul (Lipka & Brinthaupt 3). In view of the highly autobiographical nature of Plath's texts, it can be related to the literary projection of the author as a white American woman in transition from adolescence to adulthood and from being single to being married, living, and writing in two English speaking countries separated by the Atlantic.

The third theoretical point will be my discussion of femininity and womanhood as praxis in Plath's texts since they involve a certain relationality, that is the feminine self being in a relation to the *other* through which a reaction to the established order can be manifested – to be done against key Second-wave feminist texts such as *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Hélène Cixous and *This Sex Which Is Not One* by Luce Irigaray. The transformation that Bloom speaks of can certainly be viewed as "epistemic and (re)existence-based" (Walsh 20), since Plath, through describing the experiences that she was going through, was able to attain the transgressive perceptions of the world traversing her texts.

Consequently, Plath could be connected to the decolonial project in its larger conceptual frame, and this connection will be pursued by way of limited association, namely in its advancement of "other ways of being, thinking, knowing, theorizing, analyzing, feeling, acting, and

living for us all – the otherwise that is the decolonial *for*" (Walsh and Mignolo 9). According to Catherine Walsh, it "implies the recognition and undoing of hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality, and thought, structures that are clearly intertwined and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity" (17). In the case of Plath, her feminine selves will be viewed as reacting largely against the patriarchality that has colonized Western thought and its appertaining normative ethics, feeling, acting, and living in the *otherwise*, creating texts of lived experience the tragedy of which remains in the selves stopping themselves at the very last moment before breaking through. In other texts, however, Plath seems to accept patriarchality and it is here that Plath's universality will be laid – contained in her alternating rebellions and acceptances, hence her uncanny appeal to the reader and challenge for the critic. It can be found in the universal appeal to freedom from indoctrination, norm, and dogma through transgression – "the epistemic disobedience" (Walsh 20) that we all need to reach cathartically, if we want to be truly free, but also in the conformity, at other moments, to this self-same world that allows us to have a peace of mind.

But to write in this manner, with a vocal divided self, there are medical aspects to consider as well. Plath was diagnosed as clinically depressive and despite some signs of possible schizophrenia both in her life and works, she was never diagnosed as such, nor will this study aim to establish the veracity of any such claims. Literary sleuthing will prove nothing since no one has been able to say with certainty of what disease of the author the sickly neurotic characters in Poe's works are manifestations. In the cases of John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Max Blecher's *Scarred Hearts* (*Inimi Cicatrizate*), tuberculosis is the conspicuous culprit. It is only possible to establish signs of a medical condition post-factum as in Iris Murdoch's *Jackson's Dilemma* and *The Green Knight* where the simpler language in longhand containing logical omissions by comparison to the writer's earlier novels was found to be suggestive of Alzheimer's disease. There are also the ethics of the matter – not

enough time has passed for researchers to be able to address such questions in depth without possibly offending someone.

As also effectuated in Halliburton's study of Poe's works, where the author declares: "Poe himself chose to emphasize: the importance not of the artist, but of the created work of art. My concern, in other words, is with the reading and understanding of texts" (Halliburton 7), this study is interested in experiencing Plath's texts in comparison with those by others through *close readings* and *qualitative research* in combination with culturological comparative discussions, aiming for conclusions based on closeness of both textual expression and themes. The approach does not completely exclude Franco Moretti's *distant reading* and *quantitative research* through the proposed discussions, but it is the author's conviction that the combination holds a more pertinent claim to potentially discovering "the great unread". By comparing lived experience and its representations by well-known American writers with others belonging to *peripheral* literatures, if we use a term from Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, and not necessarily of the literary canon there, I aim to establish not only a transatlantic universality, but also to shed light on the works and literary achievements of the respective authors. Since two of the main authors of the comparison do not belong to a *centric* world literature, we can accept that "close readings and comparative discussions are often methodological pathways that enable visibility and build dialogic relationships between not just the center and the periphery but within the periphery as well" (Alkan Burku and Günay-Erkol 5). Gayatri Spivak also insists on studying long-marginalized literary voices "as active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant" (9). As this analysis will show, there are many reasons for a literary work not to be within the canon of the country of origin, but to take that place later through new editions or translations with the probability that even the unthinkable may happen – that work to have achieved a solid status only in translation. Finally, it is also possible for a literary work to have its immanent greatness and not be part of the national canon or exist in translations. It is an awareness that identification with the literary multifaceted self, or multiple selves as the case may be, has made Plath a world feminist icon, perhaps through misconstruing some of them.

Experience itself (or lived experience) is rendered into text through language and that will result in close attention to the author's style. The lived experience will be the praxis through which Plath's texts will be revealed to be typically transgressive of accepted norms and known truths, reaching towards new epistemes of self-perception and self-realization for the woman, but also for the reader of either sex.

The interest in Sylvia Plath does not seem to wane. A quick check on Google renders hundreds of commemorative events, social commentaries, scientific articles, and conferences which are being produced almost daily. With books written yearly, these all testify to Plath's undying legacy and people's desire of experiencing her works in the context of the year 2021 – one such event in our times of pandemic and disease-related mass psychosis (the coronavirus over-bloated ego) was the "Sylvia Plath Zoomposium" in three parts: 1 May 2020, 6 June 2020, and 25 July 2020 (in total over 7 hours) held on *Zoom*, questions answered on *Twitter* and uploaded on *YouTube*. The numerous multinational participants approached Plath's works from different perspectives – her works in her times and what they mean to us as an enduring legacy which has been hugely influential for modern poets. They also discussed her personality which, nowadays, as before, as already pointed out, continues to be considered inseparable from her works. Far from being a morbid attraction, Plath was presented as remaining an inspiration for both critics and poets with topics whose treatment by Plath is ever provocative now – from her Yorkshire poems, a rereading of certain *Wuthering Heights* scenes, comparative analysis of her "Bee poems" to the ever-controversial *Ariel* poems with her husband as the treacherous protagonist, her father as the God/Nazi, and Assia Wevill, the nemesis rival, thus discoursing on her works as a continuous live inquiry into feminism and femininity. Plath's portrayal of women and their needs also entered in polemics with the well-being of women in the last days of the Age of Trump whose politics and attitudes in that aspect were compared to Plath's 1950s with the conclusion that, sadly things had rather devolved to the state they were in back then. "Literary whiteness" was, understandably, also a major subject for discussion in Plath's works. Refreshingly, a tour of Cambridge under COVID-19 restrictions was presented, the place, surprisingly, being preserved very much in the way Plath saw it in her

Letters and *Journals*. Attention was paid to her travels in England, drawings, explorations of the "uncanny", the palimpsest in her writings, transatlantic identity, her connection to the #MeToo movement, etc. Her novel *The Bell Jar*, the *Journals* and *Letters* remain sources for new readings and critical research. Very recent books (last 3 years only) are: *Sylvia Plath in Context* (2019), edited by Tracy Brain, *Reclaiming Assia Wevill: Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Literary Imagination* (2019) by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick, *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (2020) by Heather Clark and the forthcoming *We Should Meet in Air: A Graphic Memoir on Reading Sylvia Plath* (2021) by Lisa Rosale Eisenberg and *Three Martini Afternoons at the Ritz* (2021) by Gail Crowther, with Brain's essay collection being an essential reference as to new critical evaluations. Also, there has been a steady flow of documentaries and biographical novels on her life and works, providing an increasingly nuanced portrait of the poet and her reception. Plath is also popular on social media. There is a Facebook group that links her with Anne Sexton: "Anne Sexton & Sylvia Plath: Poetry Enthusiasts" with 1.7 K members with the number of members growing daily. Since the moment they were published, Plath's own works have stood as a literary testimony to her intentions and performance in writing the self. With all these in mind, we get to the following:

2. Methodology

For this study, in my earnest desire to get to "the things themselves"[5] (Merleau-Ponty lxii), I shall make use of elements from phenomenology as the philosophical discipline propounded by Husserl, and more specifically from the turn given to it by Heidegger with his *Being and Time* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty with *Phenomenology of Perception* who have themselves contributed to the exploration of spatiality by the French scholars. Thus, a key principle in my study will be *lived experience* as used in qualitative research, and namely that it

[5] "To return to the things themselves is to return to this world prior to knowledge, this world of which knowledge always speaks, and this world with regard to which every scientific determination is abstract, signitive and dependent, just like geography with regards to landscape where we first learned what a forest, a meadow, or a river is". Merleau-Ponty reiterates Husserl's understanding of what Phenomenology needs to be concerned with. – a. n.

deals with a representation of the experiences and choices of a given person (the autobiographical self) and the knowledge that they (we) gain from them. In this study two levels of *lived experience* will be considered: (1) from the close reading by the analyst (myself) of the primary texts, the possessor of the knowledge obtained from them, based on *sensation, perception, recognition,* and *judgment* (Carman xiv) leading to understanding; and (2) the same as experienced by the selves being immersed in the respective environments and laying their stories through the author's narration, representative of the author's *intentionality* (directedness of consciousness). Although the four elements above appear to be self-explanatory, it is worth mentioning what exactly will be understood by their usage from analyzing *perceptual experience* (the self in relation to the textual environment, containing the represented physical world) resulting in the analyst's receptive experience.

Sensation will be experienced "as a modality of a general existence, already destined to a physical world" (Merleau-Ponty 224), which flows through the observer without their being its author, in this case the created by Plath representations of physical worlds in her texts. *Perception* will be viewed as "an immanent sense bursting forth from a constellation of givens without which no call to memory is possible" (Merleau-Ponty 23). *Recognition* will be understood as "when we attempt to derive it from any content whatsoever, [it] always precedes itself" (Merleau-Ponty 436). *Judgment* will be considered "a sense of the perceived that is not anterior to perception itself and that seems to emerge from it" (Merleau-Ponty 44). Even with these clearly defined tools nothing can guarantee that there will not be a false perception which will lead to an unsubstantiated judgment or conclusion. However, the close readings of Plath's texts and their juxtaposition with subsequent comparisons to those by others will allow the differentiation of selves and the establishment of recurrent motifs, hence augment the likelihood of a motivated judgment (conclusion) – a correctly interpreted true perception. The evolutions of the feminine selves, "the fierce mixture of life and art that had been Sylvia Plath" (13) as Edward Butscher, one of the major Plath's biographers, put it, will be compared to accounts of lived experience by other fellow confessionalists in similar circumstances so that conclusions can be made as to the

distinctive features of Plath's representations of that experience. The findings of this analysis will be compared to claims made by other researchers of Plath's highly autobiographical texts concerning her multifaceted poetical self, coming both from her and our contemporaries, thus tracing the evolution of what has been aptly termed "Plathology".

Since Plath's works show a very strong influence by the surroundings of the characters or the lyrical 'I', Heidegger's profound notion of *Dasein* (being there) will be applied to the analysis, thus allowing a parallel discussion of the circumstances in which Plath's works were created, which, in turn, determine the nature of the respective represented spatiality. Even though these details are undoubtedly of great importance to the perceived *intentionality* in the texts, they will not be given prominence here for the simple reason that these details are well known. There is, however, another reason for that – the analyst is interested in the text itself with its predominant motifs and tones leading to a certain judgment, which will allow for a reception by a wider reading public with its respective identifications. Foregrounded will be Plath's innate interculturality – being all American from German-Austrian origin, craving a touch with the European, a solid base for a realized transatlantic lived experience rooted in perceptions of a constant abrasion with the norm. The study will deal mainly with what I would call "the effects of fantasy" on the reader in what Jacqueline Rose in her *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1992) calls "fantasy". It is not to be confused with reality: "one way that individuals work with and transform what their inner and outer reality can be" (x) – realized *intentionality*. According to Rose the fact that Plath's writing "impinges too closely on reality (hers but not only hers" (x) does not mean that one cannot write about Plath or other writers who have turned their lived experience into the primary subject of their writings (x). Rose also addresses the ethical issue of using material that has been omitted from Plath's published works, saying that: "to do so can involve an infringement of privacy, but not to do so is to accept uncritically a version of Plath's writing that is not complete, not her own" (x). Just like Hughes, Leonard Woolf became the editor of Virginia Woolf's Diary, and, like Plath's, it comprised a large period of the writer's life. In the matter of the writer's ethics and image, it is

worth quoting what he says in the "Preface" referring to diary writing and its abridged publication:

> The omissions [in a diary] almost always distort or conceal the true character of the diarist or letter writer and produce spiritually what an Academy picture does materially, smoothing out the wrinkles, warts, frowns, and asperities. At the best and even unexpurgated, diaries give a distorted or one-sided portrait of the writer, because, as Virginia Woolf herself remarks somewhere in these diaries, one gets into the habit of recording one particular kind of mood – irritation or misery, say – and of not writing one's diary when one is feeling the opposite (vii).

Unsurprisingly, J. Rose and L. Woolf appear to be somewhat at odds as to what to do with such personal texts but with the passing of time, the sensitivity of the issue, as suggested, gradually loses acuity and the texts can be used for what they meant not only for their author, but what they mean for us, many years later. Luckily, Plath's journals and letters have been published now, and while incomplete, they certainly contribute to a better perception of Plath both in her life and in her writings, but only as a complement. Hughes's concerns with withholding information in the *Journals* referring to others including himself can certainly be understood. Still, the reader and the critic cannot help wishing that this were not so, and that information were available for everyone's perusal since when it *does* become available, the critic may no longer be around.

The study thus proposes a comparison with confessionalists on the other side of the Atlantic from epochs both preceding and succeeding hers such as Cella Serghi (Romania, from Bulgarian origin, *née* Cella Markoff), Petya Dubarova (Bulgaria), Alexandr Solzhenitsyn (Russia), Hervé Guibert (France), Pascal du Duve (Belgium) and Max Blecher (Romania) so that different elements of confessionalism can be compared in her and in them. In doing so, the different modes of life writing will be examined in Plath and the main authors of this comparative study – Sexton, Dubarova and Serghi. Autofiction will also be compared to fiction in its capacity to render lived experience with differences between comparable works. To trace the evolution of transgressivity in her texts, a chronological approach will be implemented concerning the transformations of the feminine self

through the different stages of womanhood. The predominant, most vociferous, selves will be established as recurrent themes in Plath's works. The study has its inherent limitations: with Plath's works as the primary sources compared to identical types of life writing from the other authors against biographies and testimonies of witnesses, friends, and acquaintances of the compared female authors. Numerous other sources will be used for a culturological *distant reading* in support of the findings of the *close readings*. Seminal Second-wave feminist texts will also be analyzed against key texts of the authors under consideration. Theoretical studies on Autofiction and World literature, as well as cultural histories will be part of the critical discourse. In view of the aforementioned, this study has the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Plath and the 1950s: The Autofictional Self and Femininity. This chapter is mainly biographical and provides a brief account of Plath's life against the backdrop of the events and trends marking the epoch in the USA. Emphasis is laid on the writer's childhood, college years and marriage since they play a great part in producing the acclaimed rebellious voice that she was to become, with information used mainly from interviews, documentaries, and biographies as other people's lived experience with Plath. The main literary influences that Plath had are also outlined with comparisons to moments from the lives and works of other confessional poets such as Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, W. D. Snodgrass, and John Berryman with emphasis on the Boston poets Sexton and Lowell. The autofictional self is examined as a phenomenon of life writing. The chapter sets the scene for the emergence of the feminine selves that make up the contents of the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2: Alice in Borderland: Life as Magic – the Girls and the Sea reviews Plath's works addressing childhood: *The Journals, The Letters*, the prose collection *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, and some of her early poems in the *Juvenilia* section. The texts are analyzed with attention to the geographical setting – Massachusetts and the ocean. Leitmotifs are established revealing the unusual girl's interactions with other children and the adults. The analysis is effectuated against transformations in Louis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, pointing to this major literary influence for Plath. A childhood account from the biography and poetry of another

confessionalist – Anne Sexton is also supplied by way of comparison to Plath's. Transformations are also compared between Plath's *Juvenilia* collection and some of the prose and poetry of a Bulgarian confessional poet, Petya Dubarova whose childhood was also spent at the Black Sea like Serghi's and who shares with Plath growing up in the Cold War, as well as committing suicide. The chapter finishes with a synesthesia analysis in the early works of all three poets.

Chapter 3: A Young Rebel in New York: Reacting against the Establishment – A Transatlantic Connection provides an analysis of *The Bell Jar* establishing the transgressive attitudes and behavior of the novel's female protagonist with certain references to *The Journals* and other prose. It delineates the points of criticism that Plath makes for the epoch against the popular culture from the 1950s in the city. Boston and New York are compared as settings with reference to Massachusetts in determining their role for forming her rebellious selves. A relationship is established with Cella Serghi's *The Spider's Web* (*Pânza de păianjen*) and the Romanian writer's portrayal of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe – Bucharest, Balchik and Constanța, analyzing the writers' representations of First- and Second-wave feminism in the subsequent epochs. A comparative analysis is made between Plath's treatment of disease as an intrinsic part of her revolt and that of some of her confessional precursors as well as followers such as Max Blecher, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Hervé Guibert and Pascal de Duve, respectively. Autofictional ailing selves are compared to their non-autofictional counterpart in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, establishing the distinctive traits of the two against Susan Sontag's criticism on disease in literature.

Chapter 4: Marriage and Its Discontents: The Abandoned Wife – The Transatlantic Connection Continued examines Plath's later poems – *Ariel* and 1963 poems as well as representative prose from the *Journals, Sylvia Plath's Letters* and *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* to discuss daydreams, gender roles, the representations of *the other* – Plath's perceived rival in the German poet Assia Wevill, motherhood and jealousy against represented marriage in Serghi's *The Spider's Web*. The poems "Ode for Ted", "The Jailer", "The Rabbit Catcher", "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy", "Words" and "Edge" are analyzed chronologically to discuss themes such as resurrection, despotic

husband, despondence, betrayal, symbolism, and transcendence with references to Hughes's response in his *Birthday Letters*. The 1963 pair ("Words and "Edge") are compared to the *Ariel* pair ("Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus") with indications concerning Plath's poetic transformation. The evolving attitude towards Ted Hughes as a lyrical personage and husband is also compared to later letters to her psychiatrist Dr. Beuscher. The different representation of these themes across the board is compared to Serghi's *The Spider's Web* and *Memories* (*Pe firul de păianjen al memoriei*) with references to Al Alvarez's *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*. An analysis is made of the different solution to battling depression proposed by Serghi.

Chapter 5: Plath's Autofictional Selves in Comparison and World Literature serves as the concluding chapter. The study seeks a mythological interpretation underscoring the essential elements in the works of the compared autofictive women writers. Key traits of represented femininity are drawn from the previous chapters and read against the classical poem by Keats, "Lamia", thus seen as revelatory of Plath's autofictions portraying an often angry but highly vulnerable woman-goddess whose time on Earth is limited. This reading sums up Plath's main points of feminine transgressivity and submission, forming an autofictional *bildungsroman* revelatory of Plath's deeper engagement with patriarchal myths. The female myths inhabiting male imagination are further explored through Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" with reference to the four female authors and *écriture feminine*. The positions of the female authors as "World Writers" are discussed against the key critical work on the subject by David Damrosch *What is World Literature*. The places of Plath, Sexton, Serghi and Dubarova in World Literature are also examined against Pascale Casanova's important critical reference *The World Republic of Letters* with pertinent comments on decolonizing the Eurocentric model and final thoughts on the capacity of autofiction to have a universal appeal, raising important questions and finding viable solutions based on the actual lived experience of the writers.

CHAPTER 1: PLATH AND THE 1950s: THE AUTOFICTIONAL SELF AND FEMININITY

1. The Cold War, pop culture and revolt

Right after the end of World War II, undefeated America emerged as the most powerful country in the West. War production was quickly switched to production of goods for general consumption with the important exception of nuclear device proliferation – from atomic to hydrogen bombs and ballistic missiles. Under the shadow of the forthcoming Cold War, Americans lived relatively peaceful lives which became tenser as the decade progressed. Of great importance in their daily routines were the television and the radio. The automobile had taken a firm hold as a family necessity, but also as an image booster for boys. Popular culture featured a new thriving of the film industry which saw the rise of stars such as Marlon Brando with *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *On the Waterfront* (1954), James Dean with *East of Eden* (1955), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Giant* (1956), Grace Kelly with *Rear Window* (1954) and *To Catch a Thief* (1955). Kim Novak, Natalie Wood and Eva Marie Saint also received the roles of their lives. Already established names such as Vivian Leigh and Cary Grant were active in the 1950s partnering with Brando and Kelly, respectively. A major film director during the decade was Alfred Hitchcock and his ground-breaking movies *Vertigo* (1958), *Rear Window* (1954) and *North by Northwest* (1959) successfully captured the intensity of some of the postwar anxieties. Unlike the movies that tackled these issues psychologically, in literature, a fascinating new movement, the beats (the beat generation) had a generally more covert, but equally powerful reaction which manifested itself in rejecting materialism and turning towards picaresque spiritual self-quests. These writers were hugely influential over popular culture with the key works of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956), William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959) and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). Still, the mainstream experience outside the arts was closely connected to the specter of communism roaming within artistic and political circles with seismic

ripples spreading everywhere. The USA was eager to establish itself as a major international player together with the USSR, but on the opposite side – in the NATO created in 1949 as an anticommunist military organization. The breaking up of the war alliance between the two great powers had rekindled old fears and mutual distrust. The American state, not unlike its communist counterparts in the Comecon socialist republics: Europe – the Eastern bloc, Asia with North Korea, and Cuba right at their noses, hastened to impose restrictive patriotic routines not very different from similar practices in the USSR and the Soviet satellite states: "inside schoolrooms, the emphasis was on producing model citizens who never questioned authority. School curricula frequently included lessons on manners, safety, and thrift. Church membership and attendance rose significantly in the 1950s, and religious values were represented in school days that began with prayers, Bible readings, and saluting the American flag" (Purdy 22). It was under the presidency of Eisenhower (1953 – 1961) that America produced its so-called "silent generation" – "[it] generally saw nothing wrong with their country, which had recently survived the worst depression in history and two world wars. Most Americans, other than those directly affected, were able to pretend that poverty and racism did not exist in the United States. The Cold War made it seem unpatriotic to question decisions made by political leaders" (Purdy 22). Unlike the 1920s, which, in the wake of the First World War, saw the glamorous iteration of the American Dream epitomized in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the 1950s, after the Second World War, had a much humbler domestic incarnation "of marriage, family, and a new car and home in the quickly developing suburbs" (Trevino 37). If the 1920s were marked by jazz, the 1950s saw the birth of rock & roll and this new kind of music was as revolutionary for its times as was jazz for the Roaring 1920s, quickly becoming the new craze. Elvis Presley was only one of the big names. Rising stars such as Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and J. D. Richardson left their mark on the new style of music and burned out of sight in the tragic plane crash of 3 February 1959 when they all lost their lives. The date was declared "the day the music died" and the spirit of the 1950s through their music was revived memorably in the movie *La Bamba* (1987). The *flapper* per se had vanished with the 1920s, but it left its indelible mark as new liberated lines of women's clothing, so

the fashions of the 1950s recalled that new-found freedom but at the same time looked nostalgically back to the covert sex appeal of the corseted Victorian dresses in "narrow waists, full or long skirts and fitted bodices […] Women used undergarments to create the popular form-flattering and long-legged silhouettes of the day" (Trevino 46-7). People born in the 1920s usually had their children in the 1950s, so the two generations were opposed in more than one way and not infrequently between them stood the parent-child distrust but also concern, which had its expression in forming the outlook of the epoch. The fashions of the 1950s though were much more varied in shapes and sizes both for men and women and some of the lines came startlingly close to modern casual wear, especially with the introduction of the pants as an occasional women's choice. The numerous adolescents, a result of the baby boom, "became a major consumer force openly cultivated by designers and manufacturers. For many adolescents and young adults, fashion became a symbol through which to express rebellion against adult society and conventions" (Trevino 58). And as it could be expected, actors such as James Dean, Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe were the usual suspects as the trend setters. The result was different protesting trends: "the blue jeans became common. Rebellious fashions of the 1950s included the rock and roll 'greaser' look, featuring tight jeans, leather jackets, T-shirts with packs of cigarettes rolled in the cuffs, boots, sideburns, and long hair […] Beatniks expressed their contempt for mainstream society in part through their dress, most often featuring khaki pants, black sweaters, and sandals" (Trevino 50). Yet, over all hung the shadow of the mushroom cloud, especially in Las Vegas – only 65 miles to the north of the city was the NTS (The Nevada Test Site) where between 1945 and 1992, 928 nuclear tests were conducted out of which 828 underground. The clouds of the exploding bombs could be seen from the city and during the 1950s and 1960s they were considered a tourist attraction when the danger of radiation was not fully understood. Another way of sensing the Cold War was the incessant pouring of anticommunist propaganda from both the radio and the TV, which could already be found in almost every American home, as well as the military drills during which school students had to crawl on all fours under the desks for fear of a nuclear assault coming from the communist

East. But the worst of all was "the Red Scare". Due to the rampant McCarthyism in the 1950s, on the grounds of the McCarran Act of 1950 and the Smith Act of 1940, allowing prosecution for those advocating the overthrowing of the American government or subjecting it to subversion, "by 1954 more than 100 investigations of potential communist activity had been carried out by HUAC (the House Un-American Activities Committee)" (Purdy 56). By that time Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (1848) had become nothing but a text. As a result of the investigations, Purdy points out that "some 10 000 people lost their jobs, most of them in positions that would not have been security risks even if they had been Soviet spies" (58). The most infamous case of these persecutions were the Rosenbergs (Julius and Ethel) who were accused of high treason for allegedly having submitted classified information to the Soviets concerning the Atomic Bomb project, were found guilty and consequently sentenced to death in an act of "American Fascism" (Peel 207). They were electrocuted on 19 June 1953. Eisenhower had refused them clemency on February 11, 1953. Exactly 10 years later, on this very date, Sylvia Plath was to take her own life.

2. The life of the poet through the lived experience of the others

Plath's biography is presented here briefly through those who had first-hand contact with her and were willing to talk to share the experience. Not all of them speak of her in a positive light, which should come as no surprise. Since she was married to the English poet Ted Hughes and her self-induced death caused so much controversy which affected Hughes directly, it is a small marvel that at a certain point after her death there were formed two clearly defined camps – pro-Plath and pro-Hughes. However, the aim of this part of the study is not to take sides, nor is to attain an ultimate irrevocable truth. As Butscher insists, "truth is ever a pluralistic phenomenon" (6), speaking of the easily obtainable "facts and the effects of those facts upon the subject's central myth of identity, her own life" (6). As presented by the author herself or someone else, it may well be "a matter of the imagination" (Le Guin 13). Instead, it is to arrive at a short poet's biography that leaves possibilities for further investigation and work of the imagination, setting certain horizons of expectations. A more detailed understanding

of her life and work will be obtained, as Frieda Hughes says with conviction, from Plath's literary works, discussed in the next chapters.

2.1. Some considerations: the method of presentation

We have a composite perception of Plath's life – the mosaic can be assembled to a fair semblance of completion through her writings – prose and poetry, as well as from additional sources – documents – audio interviews with the poet, biographies such as Peter Davison's *The Fading Smile* (1994) and Edward Butscher's essay collection *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (1977). Well researched fictionalized accounts of her life such as Kate Moses's *Wintering* (2003) and the film *Sylvia* with Gwyneth Paltrow in the role of Sylvia Plath from the same year also offer insights. An excellent documentary is the *Voices & Visions* production *Sylvia Plath* (1988), containing interviews with her mother, critics, teachers, and acquaintances of the family. Very well-known is the 1961 BBC radio interview where both Plath and Hughes declare their mutual support and admiration of each other's work while also sharing some urban anxieties. More recent worthwhile documentaries shedding light on her life are the following: *Ted Hughes: Stronger than Death* (2015), featuring Frieda Hughes who speaks about both her parents, and *Sylvia Plath: Inside the Bell Jar* (2018) built on scenes from the book. Documentaries in other languages also offer the fascinating perspective of her life and works viewed through the prism of other cultures e. g. *Sylvia et ses fantômes* (France Culture, 2000) and *Mourir pour vivre* (France Culture, 2008). Since more attention will be paid to each important phase of her life through her works, growing up, getting married and living in England is presented here briefly, with glimpses into her everyday life from all periods, mainly extracted from some of the mentioned documentaries and biographies, with the valuable lived experience of the first-person narrators and resulting commentaries by the analyst.

2.2. Childhood and adolescence

Sylvia Plath was born on 27 October 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, USA and died on 11 February 1963 in Primrose Hill, London, UK. Her mother Aurelia was American from Austrian descent, and her father Otto was German. Being born in America, Sylvia Plath was in her own words, "on one side a first generation American, on the

other side a second generation American" (*Sylvia Plath*). Her childhood was spent near the ocean, and she remembers with loving memories "the hurricanes we used to have" (*Sylvia Plath*), the image of the sea remaining with her ever since. Her mother Aurelia also remembers spending time on the beach with her daughter and confirms Plath's affirmation of a happy time near the breaking waves. Her father was an entomologist who taught at Boston University. He certainly was a monumental if contradictory and elusive figure in her childhood, being portrayed differently time and again in her prose and poetry. Otto Plath was suffering from diabetes, but this fact was unknown to him, and he thought he was dying of lung cancer mistaking his symptoms for the disease that had stricken a friend of his. As a result, he sought medical treatment too late, and the diabetes had caused an infection in his leg which had to be amputated. Plath had a younger brother, Warren, who did not seem to understand that their father was dying, while little Sylvia, according to Aurelia Plath, was praying every evening that he would become well (*Sylvia Plath*). Her mother declares that on hearing of his death, Sylvia said with desperation, "I'll never speak to God again" (*Sylvia Plath*), and this reaction of utter despondence is, as we shall see, well reflected in the conflicting images of her father that she built in her prose and poetry. After the father's death, the children, as Sylvia's mother testifies, had the whole house to themselves and could play anywhere they wanted, but does that mean that Sylvia Plath had a happy childhood? This is how the poet answers this question: "Well, I think I was happy up to the age of about 9, very carefree, I believed in magic, which influenced me a good bit and at 9 I was rather disillusioned" (*Sylvia Plath*). This disillusionment roughly coincides with the sickness and death of Otto Plath and clearly after he died Sylvia also changed, developing a darker outlook on life. Aurelia Plath further testifies to Sylvia's starting to see the world in poetical images with an occasional sinister tinge, reminiscing about the time spent on the beach when Sylvia would see the moon halo as "witch's hair". Aurelia goes on to ascertain that Sylvia "learned to type very competently from the age of 13 on" (*Sylvia Plath*). According to her mother, she could do 80 words a minute and the typewriter seemed to have become an extension of her body. From the age of 11 onwards Sylvia started keeping a diary which soon blossomed into pages of taken down daily lived

experience[6]. It is a revelation to see Sylvia Plath's early identification with the world of nature through her memories, especially with the creatures of the ocean, an identification that would assume new somber dimensions later, but here, in her childhood, with an Alice in Wonderland sense of wonder, she happily craved becoming one of them:

> When I was learning to creep, my mother set me down on the beach to see what I thought of it. I crawled straight for the coming wave and was just through the wall of green when she caught my heels. I often wonder what would have happened if I had managed to pierce that looking glass. Would my infant gills have taken over the salt in my blood? For a time, I believed not in God or Santa Claus, but in mermaids. They seemed as logical and possible to me as the brittle twig of a seahorse in the Zoo aquarium or the skates lugged up on the lines of cursing Sunday fishermen – skates the shape of old pillowslips with the full coy lips of women (*JP* 24-5).

It is a bit unnerving to watch the unfinished metamorphosis of the little girl checked midway, as well as her desire to break on through to the other side as Jim Morrison might have said. As she grows half-amphibian, so the skates[7] eerily take on shapes of inanimate objects, appearing to become part of our world, but at that point they are already dead; yet parts of them acquire the uncanny resemblance of seemingly shy women, thus instilling the sensation that these women are possibly just as dead to the rest of the world and their ostentatious coyness was all in vain. We can say that in the quoted essay ("Ocean 1212-W") we have a clear example of Plath's transgressive writing in a masterful recreation of a magical childhood. Her final memory of the sea is of the year 1939 when the ocean violently imposed its brute force upon everyone living on the edge of the known world. It is this unruly force of the sea that led to mythologizing her father once he was gone by the semblance between them. After her father's death, the remaining family moved inland, but it is then that the critic Sandra Gilbert sees the beginning of the appearance of what she calls "the disquieting muses"[8] (*Sylvia Plath*) that are to find an outlet of breaking with decorum in *The*

[6] All the entries before 1950 are lost. – a. n.
[7] Stingray-like flat bottom sea fish lacking the sting. – a. n.
[8] One of 5 poems that could be related to the year 1957. – a. n.

Colossus. Having remained half orphan, Sylvia developed a love-hate relationship with her mother and although her poems suggest a tender feeling for her, there is also the sensation of an enemy, an opposing dissenter's force, most prominent in her novel. In the same documentary she claims to not have had a "happy adolescence" and she cites that as the reason why she turned to writing.

In 1950, Plath attended Smith College, Massachusetts, which was a college for girls. She entered the college with the resolution that she wanted "to be the girl to be God[9]", excelled as a student and won a scholarship as a guest editor, among other girls, at *Mademoiselle* magazine, New York – a period of her life immortalized in *The Bell Jar*. Indeed, her teachers testify in glowing terms of her academic achievements calling her "a ferociously gifted student", also confirmed by Butscher's inquiry into Plath's school years (5). Gilbert, however, speaks of a natural duality in Plath, claiming that there was "the high intellectual commitment to academic activity on one hand, and on the other hand, the desire to be a red-blooded all-American girl" (*Sylvia Plath*). Wilbury Crockett, a high teacher of hers, speaks of an easy transition to college "because she had been an omnivorous reader" (*Sylvia Plath*). Margaret Shook, a college professor, talks about the social atmosphere and the desire they had for the girls to turn into ladies which had to do with keeping evening hours and a dress code (*Sylvia Plath*). The protocol excluded the possibility for male guests other than brothers and fathers to really come close to the girls' premises. Butscher, having interviewed "contemporaries who knew her [Plath] more intimately" (10), suggests "a more complex and credible personality, a driven girl obviously torn between a constant need for public admiration and a less acceptable compulsion to leave her mark upon the world at any cost, an occasionally neurotic, usually affected young lady with an enormous ego and an imagination to match" (10). Gordon Lameyer, a *beau* of Plath's during her Smith years remembers her apologies for "having to hibernate for eight months of the year,

[9] In her life and writings Plath builds an image of herself as a "White Goddess" (based on Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, a historical grammar of poetic myth from 1948) which she systematically rewrites, destroys, and rebuilds, changing shape, rejecting its own white color and yet continuously inscribing new meanings to both being woman and whiteness. – a. n.

promising at the end to emerge like Alice in Wonderland, stepping through her magic mirror and becoming a sun-worshipping summer queen" (39). But that does not seem to have happened, given the fact that Alfred Kazin, a visiting professor for Smith College for "his American Literature course […] even allowed her to write creative papers rather than critical ones" (Lameyer 39). While still at Smith and before graduation, Plath appears to have had a harrowing encounter with the notorious Woodrow Wilson Committee[10], which she describes as "a hideous committee of 4 smug men" (Lameyer 40), yet another reason for her unconcealed resentment for Eisenhower under whose presidency she met them. Lameyer blames his being jilted in the end on not being "godlike enough to be both father and lover" (41).

In the summer of 1953 Sylvia Plath, aged 21, found herself in New York. The experience was a shocker in so many ways which made Plath feel socially inadequate and that sensation was so poignant that she made her first documented suicide attempt on August 24, 1953, after having undergone a course of ECT (electroconvulsive therapy), by taking her mother's sleeping pills[11]. Aurelia Plath testifies that her daughter's first words, after regaining consciousness, were, "That was my last act of love" (*Sylvia Plath*), sounding enigmatic enough. Al Alvarez, poet, and editor of *The Observer* accentuates the huge importance of the attempted suicide calling it even "an act of arrogance" (*Sylvia Plath*). Just like a true rebirth, it had unleashed enormous energy in her, culminating in the late "angry poem Lady Lazarus". The critic goes on to say that "she was in no way a passive victim", calling her "one tough cookie" (*Sylvia Plath*). Indeed, she had shown superhuman abilities in overcoming her own earthly mortality only to rise from the ashes like the Phoenix bird. Some critics, including Alvarez, have expressed doubts as to the seriousness of this attempt, but as our reading of *The Bell Jar* and "Lady Lazarus" will show there are numerous moments by which Plath exemplifies the fight she had undertaken

[10] The Committee on Public Information (CPI) was established on April 13, 1917, with executive order 2594 of President Woodrow Wilson which was the first state bureau covering propaganda in the USA. – a. n.

[11] In *The Bell Jar*, she first tries slicing her wrists: "If I looked in the mirror while I did it, it would be like watching somebody else, in a book or a play. But the person in the mirror was paralyzed and too stupid to do a thing" (156). – a. n.

against her own body bent on its ultimate destruction. Despite the subsequent revitalization, recovering from clinical depression was a slow process for Plath. While in convalescence, perhaps thinking of her European father, she jumped to the chance of living and studying at Cambridge, England, after winning a Fulbright scholarship with Kazin's recommendation, hoping to find a European lover[12], just like her mother had. That desire of hers was to come true with a precision not untainted with irony.

2.3. Marriage

On 16 June 1956 she was to marry the English poet Ted Hughes whom she had dated for four months and who could be called European only if we all agreed that England truly belongs to Europe. The fact that she loved him dearly is attested to in her *Journals*, *Letters*, and her *Johnny Panic* prose, as well as in the numerous accounts of people who knew them as a couple. They were generally happy the first four years of their marriage and traveled extensively between the two countries, as well as around England where Plath worked briefly as a teacher. Despite the strong support they both declared for each other in the 1961 radio interview, where they sound like two perfectly matched poetical sweethearts, by that time they were already having conjugal frictions that forebode a break-up. Elaine Feinstein, poet, and Ted Hughes's biographer, in *Stronger than Death*, finds the power of poetry to have played a crucial seductive role in Ted Hughes's being won over by Assia Wevill, married at the time to another poet, David Wevill, whose poetry was, by comparison, clearly inferior to Hughes's. By encouraging her husband to participate in poetry contests Plath had placed herself at his service, typing his poetry as he used longhand, confirming Butscher's suggestion that "Ted had needed Sylvia much more than he had ever realized or admitted" (14). The biographer, however, has also the following to say on the subject, linking Plath to high intelligence with Freudian undertones, "[she] had enough literary sophistication to realize that the sparsely published, rough and tumble Britisher named Ted Hughes was destined to emerge as England's

[12] In *The Bell Jar* Esther (Plath) decides to start writing a novel, but then she stops it for lack of experience: "I decided I would put off the novel until I had gone to Europe and had a lover" (129). – a. n.

foremost poet. Her selves were distinct, equally real, but they did emanate from the same narcissistic basement where the bitch goddess remained in chains" (15). Thus, Hughes's acclaimed, both in England and America, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) had shot him into the poetic stratosphere, himself being until then, a largely unpublished poet, unlike her, and she had helped him, perhaps also doing herself a service. The brute force of the verses recalling medieval heavily alliterative stanzas, their animalistic carnal nature laden with sexual connotations and overall modernist overtones, unheard of in this context, proved too much for certain women to bear – they wanted to know their author and found him equally unsettling and truly irresistible. His second poetry collection *Lupercal* (1960) only confirmed his wide success, with its author having honed his craft. Already considered a Fitzgerald-Zelda kind of couple, they were viewed as himself being the more talented of the two. Plath had happily embraced the role of his secretary, but that did not mean that her poetic talents were inferior. Yet, with an only poetry collection *The Colossus* published in her lifetime and overlooked by comparison, Plath was to prove her worth posthumously, arguably outshining her husband. Elizabeth Sigmund (*Stronger than Death*), a friend, comments on the radio interview and expresses her sympathy with their urban plight in 1961, being cramped in a small London flat. Their last stop together was Devon where Ted Hughes had taken Plath supposedly to save her and himself from the oppressive spaces of that flat. In his *Birthday Letters* (1998), called by many "poems of redemption" and released only months before his death, he finds moments to address Plath with tenderness as in the poem "Error" reminiscing about the dream world he offered her as his most cherished treasure (122). In letters unpublished before 2017, written between 18 February 1960 and 4 February 1963, Plath accuses him of having an affair with another woman (Assia Wevill) and questions her possibilities in the same pastoral setting now turned into a nightmare. By way of contrast, Frieda Hughes, always supportive of her father, comments on a happy looking Plath against a bucolic countryside setting, holding her in her arms and pregnant with her brother, Nicholas, while little Frieda is holding a kitten, the color photograph having been taken by Ted (*Stronger than Death*). The image of perhaps their most iconic photograph in black and white from 1956, Yorkshire, UK, the

year of their marriage, is very different: a radiant Plath positioned a little in front of her slightly taller husband, also happily smiling, his left arm casually but firmly clasping her waist. She is finally looking the epitome of the happy American girl of the 1950s – long wavy hair, dressed in a short-sleeved white blouse and darker polka-dot skirt.[13] Ted sports a well-intentioned wide smile still covering his teeth, but nothing like the brilliant sparkling toothed smile of Plath which could be used as the best toothpaste ad ever, disarmingly honest, and bright. He is wearing a long-sleeved white shirt and dark pants, probably gray, his left hand casually put in his pocket. Even in this photograph she is looking all American and he all English, despite her occasional best efforts to conform. The photograph looks so amazing that I believe no photo of Fitzgerald and Zelda can even come close to it. And again, it would suffice to compare the photographs – the black and white ones from the mid-1950s to the color ones from the end of the decade to see the naked truth – that Ted Hughes is simply absent from the latter. Therefore, Frieda's excuse for her father – his being the one taking the photograph, does not hold when he clearly did not want to be in the picture with the overburdened Plath – one child inside her, one in her arms and that one with a kitten.

Feinstein's claim that Hughes "wanted to reach her inner being, but it was fractured" (*Stronger than Death*) although corroborated by Frances McCullough, editor of the 1999 edition of Plath's *Journals*, who says that "she needed huge amounts of attention from him" (*Stronger than Death*), seem to present two different realities. Everyone who had the intelligence and talent of Plath would have a fractured self. This somehow reminds one of the famous line from *Peter Pan*, that "he [Wendy's father] got all of her [Wendy's mother], except the innermost box and the kiss. He never knew about the box and in time he gave up trying for the kiss" (Barrie 6). We should not forget that Mrs. Darling was English and as a respectable married lady, was supposed to have secrets. Plath seems to have been the very honesty itself in her relationship with her husband – she had no secrets from Ted, and no one has found proof to the contrary. The fact that she needed him badly can

[13] I believe my aunt had a similar look once, but she was never so happy for the obvious reason that next to her was no Ted Hughes, but my uncle, a formidable figure himself, albeit certainly paling in comparison. Also, I have this memory of the late 1970s and from a place thousands of miles away from England – a. n.

hardly be blamed on her "fractured self"; that was, judging by the *Journals* and the *Letters*, the primordial need of the woman in love to be with the man of her affection always. The claims that Ted Hughes was hugely influential in refining Plath's poetry, helping her to reach her true voice, seem to me largely unfounded – Plath wrote her best pieces of poetry with no Ted around although he should be given credit for suggesting occult themes for her writings. After Hughes moved out, Plath's poems took on a new darker intensity and sharpness, and this could indeed be attributed to Ted Hughes (in actual physical absence). By not being with her, he stirred up all of Plath's senses and the results were the *Ariel poems*.

Their marriage, for all practical purposes, came to an end in 1962 and although Frieda Hughes quotes her father, saying that "we were working towards it" (ix), meaning a reunion, their differences only deepened, leading to the final separation. Plath's feelings of hate for him never appear before his affair with her rival – only to be found in few of her *Ariel* poems. That she had become infatuated with him, while he never became uxorious of his wife, is clearly seen in the only seemingly successful attempts she made to take him off her mind after he had started the affair with the German poet, the dazzling beauty, Assia Wevill (the rival) with whom he was to have a child and who was to put an end to her own life hauntingly like Plath herself, with the difference that she also killed the child she had had with Hughes. Feinstein suggests that in her final act Plath was "obviously ambiguous about her intentions" (*Stronger than Death*) *and* cites her leaving the doctor's phone number as a proof, thus possibly insinuating some reconciliation games stemming from sympathy. According to her, Ted Hughes was supposed to see it and eventually call the doctor. This sounds overly unfeeling indeed, one needs to recall the fact that Plath had a documented history of such attempts, like Sexton, so how could she be sure that she was not playing a Russian roulette yet again? The Bulgarian poet Peyo Yavorov, as it is well known, shot himself point-blank with a gun, the muzzle against his temple, and still only managed to make himself blind[14]. When he was sure he no longer wanted to live

[14] In *The Bell Jar*, Esther (Plath) dismisses the idea for exactly the same reason: "I'd already read in the papers about people who'd tried to shoot themselves, only they

in the terrible state he already was, he used a gun and poison so that there would be no escape. And so, the death certificate Plath received, cites in handwriting: "*carbon monoxide poisoning (domestic gas) while suffering from depression did kill herself*" as the cause of death. Struggling in one of the worst English winters to date, severely depressive, Plath put her head in what Butscher calls "a womblike oven" (13), perhaps in a symbolic gesture of realizing a full circle, a deliverance, and a return to innocence.

Why had the marriage not worked? Butscher quotes an acquaintance, Clarissa Roche, who gives the following reasons for its failure, referring to "the inevitable misunderstandings on both sides of the British-American ledger and interjecting her own view that professional jealousy, Ted's jealousy of his wife's growing literary powers, might have played a significant role in the estrangement, which he had precipitated by having an affair" (20). And then he adds, "but supportive details were notable by their absence. Sylvia's poetry alone, however literal its original locus, could not provide enough answers" (20). It must be true that Sylvia Plath was enamored of an idea or that she was deceived by appearances, it makes one wonder how much we regret the fact that Marianne does not marry Willoughby from *Sense and Sensibility* or why Plath could not be like Clara Middleton from the reincarnation of Austen's womanizing archetype in Meredith's *The Egoist.* Why did Ted Hughes have to make two beautiful intelligent women unhappy[15]? Who did he think he was? Lord Byron, Rochester, or Dorian Gray? Or he was all of them simultaneously, or just himself, Ted Hughes, and he could leave behind only a trail of ruined suicidal women. In his excuse Hughes could have said that Plath's first attempt preceded their marriage. Still, one could argue that Plath had been largely unhappy before Hughes and too disappointed after his affair with Wevill, and possibly other women, to find the strength to go on

ended up shooting an important nerve and getting paralyzed, or blasting their face off, but being saved, by surgeons and a sort of miracle, from dying outright" (165). – a. n.

[15] In *The Bell Jar* one of the eerie prophesies is the identification of Ted Hughes with Buddy Willard in a question that Ted Hughes probably also asked himself: "Do you think there's something in me that *drives* women crazy?" (252).

living a hard life, not yet recognized as a great poet[16], alone with the two children, a London alien. Unsurprisingly, the act of dying, along with the well-deserved fame, brought Plath many sympathizers who repeatedly vandalized her gravestone in Heptonstall, West Yorkshire, trying to chisel off the name "Hughes" from it and leave only the name of the poet – Sylvia Plath[17]. As if in unison with such attitudes, the commemorative plaque at 3 Chalcot Square, Primrose Hill, London bears the inscription under the "English Heritage" logo, simply stating that "Sylvia Plath, 1932-1963, Poet, lived here, 1960-1961". The gravestone, however, bears clear marks of the attempts to efface Hughes from collective memory and dissociate him from Plath, possibly done by feminist pilgrimages. All that to the horror of Frieda Hughes who complains of that sentiment in the "Foreword" to the *Restored Ariel*. To add fuel to the fire, the 2017 letters accuse Hughes of physical abuse causing Plath the miscarriage of their second child in 1961, an incident that had left Butscher baffled, citing "no apparent cause" (21). Ted Hughes died on 28 October 1998 from a banal heart attack while undergoing an unglamorous colon cancer treatment. To his credit or discredit, he refused to participate in what he was to call "the Plath Fantasia".

2.4. From causing a death controversy to being a feminist icon

As with Lora Karavelova's controversial suicide, which eventually led to Yavorov's taking his own life, Plath's death remains partly a mystery. It was not difficult to reconstruct the death scene, but it was very difficult to pinpoint the exact cause or causes for her resorting to this gesture in all earnest. *Stronger than Death* suggests that

[16] *The Bell Jar* was published in England a month before her death and *Ariel* was published posthumously, as were to be published her *Journals* and *Letters Home*. – a. n.

[17] Hughes had managed to antagonize great numbers of Plath's fans by removing some of the poems published after Plath's death, acting in his capacity of executor and disposer of her personal and literary estates, because he considered them offensive or misrepresenting certain people (acquaintances, sometimes himself), hence the delayed publication of *Ariel* in the USA – 1971 (requested by Plath's mother) and the restored edition of Plath's landmark in poetry from 2004 edited by Frieda Hughes. He also admitted to having destroyed the last part of Plath's *Journal*, which he claimed was for the sake of their children. – a. n.

a play by Hughes aired on the BBC shortly before Plath's death and called *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*[18] may have led to it. Daniel Huws, a poet, and fellow student claims it was "her death warrant" based on an allegorical interpretation and identification with a hare in the play that hypnotized her into killing herself. Sigmund suggests that involving the sacrificial hare and buying roses with the blood money for the male protagonist's mistress "must have given her a shock", so Sigmund asks: "Why would he write such a thing?" (*Stronger than Death*). Huws insists that "that was one of the heaviest crosses that Ted had to carry for the rest of his life" (*Stronger than Death*). Sigmund recalls Hughes looking very upset about it and even intimating: "it doesn't fall on many men to murder a genius", which seems to have been confirmed by Hughes's own echo, "I might just as well have" (*Stronger than Death*). "Life after Death", a *Birthday Letters* poem, deals with regret, reproach, possibly remorse, in the shape of "howling wolves", perhaps an allusion to Hughes's predatory instincts towards other women which make both him and her vulnerable to uncontrollable forces and deprive them of life. In the poem she is dead, and he is about to die, lying next to her, with purifying snow falling and piling over them, both becoming part of Kipling-like wolf folklore with their children "turned in their sleep into orphans" (183). Ruth Fainlight, a family friend, suggests that "Assia was the evil demon incarnate" (*Stronger than Death*) and that she was indirectly responsible for Sylvia's suicide. Assia herself seems to have complained that she was being haunted by Sylvia, but that comes as no surprise since she took care of Frieda and Nicholas and had to use many of the objects belonging to the Hughes.

In the 1970s with the feminist movement gaining momentum and Sylvia and Assia having taken their own lives, it was no surprise that *Ariel* became such a huge anthem for women's freedom from men's perceived oppression and that Hughes's reputation came under attack. Plath was seen as an exemplar, a martyr, and a saint. Hughes had become a character in her poems, especially in "The Jailer", and was directly accused of "having committed the perfect murder", "An American Tragedy" *à la anglaise*. A poem included into a feminist anthology, *Monster: Poems* (1972), called "Arraignment" written by

[18] Based on a story from a prose collection. – a. n.

Robin Morgan, a poet and feminist, began with the line: "I accuse Ted Hughes" and qualified the English poet directly "a cold-blooded murderer". In the poem Morgan asks for tearing off his sexual organ and killing him in revenge for all the women he had blighted. The author claims that Hughes "was morally responsible" for Assia's death, and by analogue, for Sylvia's, too. Frieda Hughes declares herself "appalled that something that had happened in 1963 could be carried forward"[19] (*Stronger than Death*). With both Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath no longer among the living, their lives and works are now in the welcoming domain of literature while the controversies in film, fiction and criticism persist.

2.5. England

According to Alvarez, who introduced Plath together with other American confessional poets to the British reading public through *The Observer*, by the time Plath met him in London in 1962, "she had an absolutely irrefutable proof that she was a real poet" (*Sylvia Plath*). Then Alvarez goes on to claim that the poems he was presented with were of "an order quite extraordinary for the century" (*Sylvia Plath*). Living in England, often alone, as Ted Hughes would be gone on his poetry readings, or after women he found irresistible, Plath was busy being a mother and poetry for her was a form of expressing pent up feelings which otherwise would have caused her to explode like Langston Hughes's "dream deferred". She pushed the pram along London streets with her two kids, Nicholas in it, Frieda walking by, saw to it that all household chores were done and in her free time would produce her remarkable poetry which, as Frieda later said, drew on her everyday life, but which had control over the banalities of this existence, in Plath's own words, "with informed and intelligent mind" (*Sylvia Plath*). Yet the intensity of the produced work in the last year of her life, according to Alvarez, was only "comparable to Keats's great year" (*Sylvia Plath*). Plath shares her idolization of England which had started with her English Major when she was studying the English classics, saying that "here it all began" (*Sylvia Plath*). Walking on the streets brought back memories of reading Dickens in her childhood.

[19] Reacting to censorship from the publishers, Morgan reformulated her statement into a question: "How Can I Accuse Ted Hughes?". – a. n.

London for her often felt like a literary experience as she recognized scenes she seemed to have seen before in her English readings, but in everything else she felt all American. It was in England that Plath found her inimitable poetic voice in the *Ariel* poems which, in view of her overall transatlantic experience and the fact that she produced her most significant literary achievements there, including the publication of *The Bell Jar*, has made certain university professors list her in their course of English, not American poetry. Nevertheless, despite the constant often fascinating discoveries she was making of English mores (well reflected in *Johnny Panic*), Sylvia Plath was feeling lost and abandoned. The old selves of the Smith College and *The Colossus* poems were gone. In their place was a new self, stripped of all sentimentality, a poetic self that turned everything from her everyday life into transfixing verses, the inimitable *Ariel* voice. Alvarez suggests that her last poems express just that – "storming anger" and "facing a demon", which required "shelving all earlier poetic formulae" (*Sylvia Plath*). It seems that she had been able to channel all her energy into a unique poetic self which was speaking for all the women and was going beyond everything that women had said by that time through literary means. It was England that gave her that experience, where she felt so alone, but where she was able to master a unique voice of feminine revolt. It was in England, too, that Keats was sure he was dying when he coughed up "arterial blood" (413) on the napkin, blood whose color he knew only too well to be mistaken, as he testifies in a letter. Did Plath know, having a Keatsean year of hectic poetic creativity, that she was going to die soon, too – on another February day?

The biggest legacy that Plath left for England were probably her two children who were to become Englishmen, a sort of a return gift of the magi for her parents with European origins. Many things nearly mirror that situation. Sylvia had a brother Warren, and she in turn had two children, a girl, and a boy: Frieda, and Nicholas. Nicholas Hughes committed suicide in Alaska in 2009, he was a well-respected biologist just like his grandfather – Otto Plath. He was 47 and according to his sister, Frieda Hughes, who is a poet and children's literature writer, had been battling depression for some time before he decided to end it all. With both her parents on her syllabus once, Frieda jocularly announces what her predicament was – yes, she could ask her father about what he

meant in his works, he could probably provide information about what her mother had meant, too, but what if the examiners disagreed? She saw no winning situation for herself since no one would believe her that she was not helped in her preparation by "the horse", or if she had received help, having heard it "from the horse's mouth", how valuable would that really be in a literature exam? And what that means is that unadulterated literary studies are all about interpretation, where interdisciplinarity has not intervened.

From the analyzed sources (documentaries and biographies), Plath emerges as a driven young woman determined to succeed as a poet, a mother and wife. Her devotion to her husband, Ted Hughes, was evidently not properly understood by the people who knew her, being interpreted as an unhealthy dependency. Clearly, Plath was an overachiever who did her best to excel academically. Her desire to be an all-American girl did come true, ironically, in England. Traumatized by her father's death, Sylvia became a writer, exploring topics that were not accepted immediately, but acquired an aura of fascination after her death. Apparently, Plath became a posthumous celebrity due to both her life and works. Growing up with her father, Frieda Hughes is invariably partial, remaining without her mother from a very early age. With her life and works Plath seems to have gained both admiration and denigration. The new studies, documentaries, biographies, fiction, conferences, and readings of her works constitute an incessant reevaluation of her significance to American and World Literature.

3. Sylvia Plath and the confessionalists' club: Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, W. D. Snodgrass, and John Berryman

In his discussion of Dylan Thomas's poetry, Louis Simpson strongly suggests that "it is not wrong to interpret the meaning of a poem, it is only wrong to interpret too much" (26) and adds that "this is where critics go wrong, and the end of it is that the critic sets himself up in the place of the poet" (26). According to him, "we must not let the possible meanings of the poem overwhelm the experience of listening and seeing" (26). Furthermore, "to read poetry is to be aware of the impression the poem makes, not to try to have the lines fit an argument in every particular" (26). So, he concludes, "I would go so far as to say

that a meaning that does not contribute to the effect a poem makes does not exist" (26). While the analyst lets himself or herself be affected by the poem through perceptual experience, he or she reaches a certain judgment which is in the realm of the interpretation. Simpson's claim suggests that extant meanings could only be subject to receptivity that allows the poem to be experienced more fully and the total of all readers' perceptions would be meanings resulting in multiple understandings determining a prevalent reception. Again, his warning against the critic assuming too much has to do with the analyst's intentional departure from the text, not allowing a closeness that poems only necessitate, but as clarified already, poetical prose or prose in poetry, should be treated in the same manner. Consequently, some of Plath's poetic pieces will be compared to the works of other fellow confessionalists throughout this study, being subjected to the analyst's perceptions.

3.1. Emergence, development, and influence of the movement

Plath, writing the bulk of her important poetry at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, consciously chose a mode of intimate versifying that came to be known as "Confessionalism". Emerging at the end of the 1950s as an all-American poetical aesthetics, it was undoubtedly an exteriorized introvert reaction to the raging McCarthyism of the period, a peculiar continuation of the beat movement. The most renowned representative of this select club during the decade was Robert Lowell, but after the posthumous publication of *Ariel* he was ousted by Plath, his popularity having been further diminished over the years, also losing to Anne Sexton, a good friend of Plath's, who committed suicide on 4 October 1974. This brings us to the nature of this type of poetry. In the 1950s its distinctive features were focused on but not limited to extreme individual experiences such as mental illness, sexuality, and suicide. It introduced a poetic mode that offered the most intimate touch with the poets themselves, a textual communication which resonated with many who could identify with their poetic selves. Strong reactions to the perceived nihilism and narcissism of the movement appeared as early as the 1960s when poets from the so-called "Language school of poetry" made their names known including prominent ones such as Susan Howe, Michael Palmer

and Lyn Hejinian. They were writing in a manner that was a clear rejection of the confessionalists' expressionism and who sought to reconstruct meaning through the subdued presence of the lyrical speaker – even when the 'I' was there, familiar surroundings would soon give way to the play of the imagination which dissociated the 'I' from actual lived experience. While technically belonging in the postmodernist period, their preoccupations with language and form hankered back to modernists such as William Carlos Williams, E. E. Cummings, and Gertrude Stein. By contrast, by showing admiration for, but refusing to elaborate on the works by other modernists, imagists such as T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, thus reducing the poetical mannerisms in their works, the confessional poets were also very different from late postmodernists such as Denise Levertov and Charles Olson. Still their insistence on versified personal experience in clear rhythmic patterns makes them a unique phenomenon in American poetry; their revolt against recognizable authoritarian socio-political trends in the 1950s and 1960s will place them in their own times, but without losing a modern appeal. Although very personal, typically the confessionalists' works from the period can be related to larger socio-political events and trends marking the epoch, while certainly not unrelated to our sociopolitical times due to recycling authoritarian patterns. It should be mentioned that not all poets from the movement agreed on the label, a notable exception being Berryman who could relate the term only to its ecclesiastical meaning. Not all confessional poets were depressive, either. A notable exception is Snodgrass who was an established poet towards the late 1950s with his *Heart's Needle* (1959), as Berryman was to become with his *Sonnets* (1967) and Ginsberg with *Kaddish and Other Poems* (1961), and is well known for the phrase he coined: "Snodgrass is walking through the universe". Ginsberg is primarily linked with the beats and the complete liberation of any formal poetical diction, using the most natural words in the context which were often considered unacceptable.

Despite the controversial nature of some poems, this was a movement that redefined American poetry and offered a rich poetic heritage that received both praise and criticism in the 1970s and 1980s. Modern confessional poets could be considered not only poets proper such as Sharon Olds, but also musical performers such as Alanis

Morrissette. And again, if we look at the works by Olds, for example at "After Making Love in Winter", we will be able to see the surviving legacy as well as the modern-day attention to detail found not in an extreme, but in an everyday event which is seen in an extraordinary, yet mundane light.

3.2. The Boston Trio: Plath, Sexton and Lowell – three poets, three poems

This part of the study examines three of the major poets in Boston (1955-1961) including Plath. It presents their poetic connection to the city and two representative poems based on a singular theme. These three poets in the given period formed a strong bond through experiencing their poetry and the city near the ocean.

3.2.1. The unassuming mentor and his assuming disciples

Plath and Sexton were good friends. They had respect for each other and loved spending time together, discussing poetry and suicide over martinis, which happened when they went to listen to Robert Lowell's seminars on poetry in Boston. Together with Lowell they could be called "The Boston Trio" (Burton 75) and Plath actively participated in the artistic life of the city between 1955-1960 when she was there. In 1959 Robert Lowell's influential *Life Studies* was published, but in the mid-1950s the most significant poet in Boston was John Holmes with Robert Frost and William Wilbur also being popular. Sexton also enjoyed her popularity as a city poet and had regular readings. Even more than Plath, Sexton could be considered a Bostonian beauty. Maxine Kumin, a fellow poet, and close friend evokes her presence from the "Forward" to *Anne Sexton*'s *Complete Poems*: "Anne Sexton as I remember her on our first meeting in the late winter of 1957, tall, blue-eyed, stunningly slim, her careful coifed dark hair decorated with flowers, her face beautifully made up, looked every inch the fashion model" (xix).

In his fascinating *The Fading Smile* about the Boston poets of the 1950s, Peter Davison, a poet and critic, reminisces about his short-lived affair or rather a fling with a very young Plath during which she fervently asked him about his knowledge of American poetry, and they listened to the recorded voice of Dylan Thomas reciting his own poetry (38). During his time with Plath, Davison finds her "bewildering,

enthusiastic, ambitious, a trifle exploitative" (39). He also speaks of her "manic-depressive energy, her enthusiasm, her determination, her duplicity, her intensity, and especially her ambition" (39) as being the aftereffects of the two-year anniversary from her 1953 suicide attempt.

He remembers Anne Sexton as always needing someone to take care of her (131). While Plath was apparently pretty much independent and really brave in all the decisions she made in life, Sexton appears to have always resorted to someone else's help with just about anything in life: "when Anne became well enough to strike out on her own, she usually found a friend, a lover, a fellow poet or an amanuensis to steer her from place to place" (131), also corroborated by Linda Sexton in her insightful and intimate account of her relationship with her mother *Searching for Mercy Street*: "Mother had many friends, and they all fit particular needs" (115).

Just like Plath's life was rife with bouts of depression, which were the most vital source for her late poetry, so was Sexton's, who suffered from a severe bipolar disorder, at the time under the larger term *hysteria*. November 8, 1956, Davison indicates for Sexton as "the first of numerous suicide attempts" (132). Already mother of two by that time, (from her husband, a man with whom she had eloped aged 19), Sexton's breakdowns intensified, but they were well incorporated into the texture of her poetry and while watching the documentaries *Poems and Commentary* and *USA: Poetry Episode Anne Sexton*, one cannot help but notice how relaxed and at ease Sexton looks – she is in the most casual of settings, usually her home, has a pleasant melodious voice with a slight southern US accent, looks very elegant and is constantly smoking a cigarette. By contrast, on video Plath looks a bit nervous, with her voice striking a cold note as she speaks. By the year 1956 Plath had already had some intensive courses of electrotherapy, but they had not done her well. Her marriage from the same year – 1956 seems to have been the only working therapeutical method and one should not wonder too much at Plath's suicide 7 years later when by that time it had broken, and Plath found herself much more miserable than before her marriage. Even though both would turn their suicide attempts into literature – with Sexton, poetry and plays, with Plath, poetry, and a novel, the literary treatment seems to have worked better for Sexton for whom attempted suicide appears to have been a life

source to appreciating life, a true rebirth, arguably much more genuine than the rather taunting "Lady Lazarus" by Plath, written only months before her final attempt.

A poet of pain, like Plath, Sexton has enough poems to prove that she also had other poetic subjects up her sleeve. In life, however, those, who knew her intimately, would remember her unmasked displays of emotional turmoil. So, Davison provides examples of Sexton's turning her own pain into everyone's occupation, and in one of them he points out:

> Her emotional life was preternaturally amplified. I can remember an evening at dinner at Arthur Freeman's house when Sexton, who smoked continuously, struck a match and seared her hand with a fragment of phosphorus. For the next two hours her pain was a presence in the room larger than that of any of the guests: ice was brought, her hand was immersed in a plastic bag full of ice water, her ululations rose and fell, her husband comforted her again and again. The guests tried to speak of other things, but it proved impossible: it was the pain that governed (132).

Indeed, writing was offered to her by Sexton's psychiatrist as a way of self-therapy (Davison 133) and if one juxtaposes Davison's account of Sexton's dramatized pain in real life and its place in her poetry, one will see that it was something that Sexton celebrated as part of life. In that aspect Plath's and Sexton's poetry find yet another common subject – hospital treatment experiences – with Sexton mostly in her early poems, with Plath – mostly in her later ones. Having attended poetic seminars by Holmes and Snodgrass, Sexton was accepted in a Lowell seminar, and she was ecstatic, but her answer to the famous poet's invitation offers a keen insight of her understanding of poetry: "I am considering framing it to prove to all comers that poets are people" (Davison 138). According to Sexton, poetry is an inextricable part of life, and poets are those who can transform life experiences into poetry. Once the reader sees the poems though, he or she may fall into the common error of dissociating the written text from its author, a live person made of flesh and bone. For the reader, they will exist on their own, open to interpretation, association, but also dissociation.

In their poetry, both Plath and Sexton allowed themselves to be influenced by others – and in Plath's case, these influences are numerous, as amply attested to in her *Journals*. Both poets, however, found a unique poetic voice which expressed itself in refined poetry with technique, form and sometimes ideas borrowed from the best fellow confessionalists. With Sexton and her "Double Image" Lowell's influence is considered to have been "profound" (Davison 139). Unlike Plath, Sexton was much more inclined to turn not only life into poetry, but also poetry into life. Davison refers to a poet that Sexton liked – George Starbuck whom Sexton in 1959, married and with two children, turned into a lover (143). Sexton was, in that sense, much more experimental, and despite heavily relying on assistance from others in her daily routines, she was much more an integral part of the poetic community than Plath was. Plath was never able to transcend conjugal love as she simply did not believe that it was worth even trying, being sure that Hughes was the only man who could give her a sensation of fulfillment. Sexton's openness to the sensory world around her, including the acute awareness of her own body is memorably revealed in a description of a Lowell seminar: "I had never been to college and knew so little about poetry and other poets that I felt grotesquely out of place in Robert Lowell's graduate seminar. […] Mr. Lowell was formal in a rather New England sense. His voice was soft and slow. It seems to me that people remember the voice of the teacher they loved long after they have forgotten what he said" (Davison 143). Sexton's perceptions of people are highly poetical and covertly sexual as her own observation of Lowell testifies and they bring us to Simpson's insistence on the experience of listening and seeing as being prevalent in our reception of poetry to "the possible meanings of the poem" (26). Sexton seems to have made special preparations in drinking before all her poetic readings and her flirting with men did not go unnoticed by the closest members of the family, even by the children, as testified by Linda Sexton: "Her obvious sexual invitation and her inebriation brought me deep shame" (119) since she, being a kid, had to "chaperone" her mother and write a letter of apology to the writer her mother had fancied the previous night (120). Martin T. Orne, being her favorite therapist, writes: "Although she was trying her best to live up to the 1950s image of the good wife and mother, she found the task

completely beyond her" (xiii). Suffering from an inferiority complex, not having pursued a higher education, unlike Plath, when asked "what she might be able to do, she finally revealed that there was only one thing that she might possibly be capable of doing well – to be a good prostitute and to help men feel sexually powerful" (Orne xiii). Diagnosed by the doctor with "hysteria" (xv) she might have suffered from what today is known as the "Peter Pan syndrome" – an impossibility to grow up and take the responsibilities concomitant with adult life. Kumin also testifies, "But behind the glamorously garbed woman lurked a terrified and homely child, cowed from the cradle onward, it seemed, by the indifference and cruelties of her world" (xxi-ii). Appearing completely free of prejudice and scruple, perhaps in some of her more overtly childish states, Sexton may have taken certain sexual liberties with her daughter Linda related to inappropriately touching her and using her nude dad as an example of a man's body[20] as testified by Linda herself in *Searching for Mercy Street* (120). If this is true, Linda Sexton, in writing candidly about it, does honor to her mother's candidness in both life and works, but has certainly shocked many readers.

Evidently, Sexton was larger than life and would not fit any frame, real or literary. Snodgrass had advised Sexton to refrain from publishing poems with hospital content distrusting the subject (Davison 144). The question he poses seems to be pertinent, unless, of course, we admit poetry to be a medium with no limits as to subjects: "It's all a release for you, but what is for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release?" (Davison 144). This claim, to me seems to be questioning the capacity of confessional poetry for a universal appeal, and that coming from a fellow confessional poet. In the personal response Sexton made entitled "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further" possibly presented during a Lowell class, appears the image of "a glass, an inverted bowl", which may have given

[20] The same "scientific" idea is presented in *The Bell Jar* where Esther (Plath) is invited to see her boyfriend's naked body by her boyfriend himself who is a medical student. Despite being sweethearts, they stop at kissing and necking (72). Her comment is ambiguous: "The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed" (71), thus suggesting that Linda Sexton must have felt very confused at the highly improbable and inappropriate scene. – a. n.

the idea of Plath's *The Bell Jar* (Davison 144). It was through this class that Plath and Sexton became friends and would go together to a bar called "Ritz" to drink martinis accompanied by George Starbuck. The class ended with Lowell's hospitalization and Sexton expressed her disappointment with Lowell about being aloof in conversations with her, which prevented her from seeking sexual intimacy (146). Davison sums up our knowledge of Sexton and her evolution as poet thus: "The story of Anne Sexton's growth into a poet is among the most familiar of the era, thanks in part to Anne's frequent and uninhibited interviews" (152). Kumin neatly synthesizes Sexton's controversial poetry and personality, concluding that: "Time will sort out the dross among these poems and burnish the gold. Anne Sexton has earned her place in the canon" (xxxiv).

In 1957 Plath was spending time in Boston with her husband, Ted Hughes, and one could safely assume that she was enjoying the trips to the Ritz bar with Sexton more than the Lowell class whose lecturer she found to be "good in his mildly feminine ineffectual fashion" (Davison 172). She was more interested in the potential competition – the other students' poems and Lowell's reaction to hers (Davison 173). In his evaluation of Plath, Lowell compared her not unfavorably to Sexton and Plath in the same year felt mildly flattered (Davison 173). Lowell remembers Plath after her death, in 1966, when he wrote his "Forward" to the English edition of *Ariel*. His portrayal of her brings the halo of a memory frozen in time in which Plath looks uncannily like a goddess descended on Earth who has taken on a human form, exuding duality:

> I see her dim against the bright sky of a high window… She was willowy, long-waisted, sharp-elbowed, nervous, giggly, gracious – a brilliant tense presence embarrassed by restraint. Her humility and willingness to accept what was admired seemed at times to give her an air of maddening docility that hid her unfashionable patience and boldness… I sensed her abashment and distinction and never guessed her later appalling and triumphant fulfillment (Davison 176).

Lowell, no doubt, has captured an elusive image, a rare sight for the beholder, but what is the "fulfillment" that he speaks of, *appalling* and *triumphant*? This would be the realization and impact of the posthumous collection of poetry that made Plath's name in death. In the "Trio" he had the position of an unassuming mentor, the one Sexton

could not seduce and whose voice was far more meaningful to her than the words that came out with it. To Plath he was effeminate and unimpressive, words or no words. The documentary *USA: Poetry Episode Richard Wilbur and Robert Lowell* presents a black and white relaxed Lowell whose face and stature are not dissimilar to those of Ted Hughes himself. It must have been his voice that put Plath off, the same one that enchanted Sexton. Davison renders the overall impression Lowell made as follows: "Robert Lowell's unmistakable voice – weary, nasal, hesitant, whining, mumbling, a curiously hybrid blend of Yankee and Confederate intonation that descended from both family and literary sources – seems in retrospect to dominate the poetic harmony of the late 1950s in Boston" (252). And he continues: "He was audible everywhere: reading, writing, teaching, socializing, translating – and dramatizing his own suffering in semi-public agony" (252). Lowell, like Sexton, suffered from bipolar disorder and received lithium treatment to prevent relapses, which, however, were far from preventable and Lowell had had two psychotic hospitalizations before the famous seminar that brought Plath and Sexton together. Just like Plath, Lowell was very ambitious and worked hard on his poems before submitting them for print. Unlike Plath or Sexton, he was far more versatile in the choice of his themes.

3.2.2. Three hospital poems: a phenomenological meditation – an introduction

I. Robert Lowell and "Waking in the Blue", *Life Studies* (1959)

In order to establish the differences in the style and approach of the three poets, I propose a comparative close reading of three representative of their opera pieces, in this case all based on hospital experience. I start with Lowell's "Waking in the Blue" from *Life Studies*. The poem is part of the celebrated collection by Lowell and presents, in this case, a study of insanity.

The first stanza presents the lyrical speaker who is the confessional 'I'. He is the patient in an establishment which is not mentioned directly. We are aware of this fact because of the presence of "the night attendant". He is "a B. U. sophomore, [that]/ rouses from the mare's-nest of his drowsy head" (81). The sensation is of a caretaker

or perhaps a nurse who is a man and who is there just for the job. He looks *drowsy* and his hair is a mess, unruly and long, called a *mare's nest*. The metaphor is quite unusual, and we also have the perception of his body parts not making one whole – they are described separately, being there as if just for an automaton who is to do his daily rounds. The nurse has had his head *propped on The Meaning of Meaning*. The reference is to a study of the influence of language upon thought, a study of symbolism by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923). We are left with the sensation that the attendant needs to find a meaning for himself, working in the hospital, but his efforts are in vain as the book seems to have been used as a propping tool – a pillow, since we get no other information from the text. On the other hand, the body naturally supporting the head, by analogy, gets this denomination itself, and by extension this also refers to the body of the lyrical 'I'. The next lines create a sensation of the speaker complaining about being kept in a cage: "Azure day/ makes my agonized blue window bleaker" (81). The day being blue is *bleaker*, becomes more desolate because he cannot benefit from the nice weather outside and the naturally *blue window* containing the natural color of the sky creates a permanent sensation of just a blue stain in the wall which the mind registers as window, but the world outside is unattainable for the lyrical 'I' and that makes the *blue window agonized* – a result of the many empty stares on part of the speaker addressed to the blue spot in the wall. The next two lines allow us to see the lyrical 'I' imagining what he cannot see, based on his hearing: "Crows maunder on the petrified fairway./ Absence ! My heart grows tense" (81). He can hear the chatter of the crows, but the *fairway* which should contain short grass is suddenly deprived of life – *petrified*, indicating that suddenly it has been covered by stones or turned to stone. The sensation is of intense listening on part of the speaker, as if trying to make out audible sounds, possibly of footsteps on the stones, which could only be heard under these conditions. This intensified listening renders the *fairway* stony – if there are footsteps, they will be heard. They are not there – the word *absence*, which constitutes an entire sentence, is given an exclamation mark and it works like a drumroll by an internal rhyme within the line which indicates the highest possible tension. The images suddenly become wild, while still remaining concrete: "as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill./ (This is the

house for the "mentally ill)" (81). The person throwing the *harpoon* is completely absent, but because the attendant seems to be the only human being there apart from the lyrical 'I', and who is already on duty, he must be the one throwing it. *Kill* rhymes with *ill*, hence the *harpoon* is aiming for the *kill* of the *mentally ill*. The perceptions from the first stanza suggest a recognition of the presence of a helpless human being whose body is hitherto unseen, but who is confined to a cage and who is about to be executed because of his illness.

The next stanza reveals the fact that there are other inmates as well (*the mentally ill*) and the reproduced picture suddenly is not very different from any description of human decay found in Ken Kesey's 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The speaker becomes completely aware of his limitations and the hopelessness of the situation, grimly reflecting: "What use is my sense of humor?/ I grin at Stanley, now sunk in his sixties,/ once a Harvard all-American fullback,/ (if such were possible !)" (81). The poem goes back in history to the Voyage of the Mayflower while the inmates are likened to *whales* for the *spear*.

The last stanza returns to bodily awareness and measuring up to the others in terms of age and weight. The attempt to look presentable is viewed as ludicrous: "I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey/ before the metal shaving mirrors" (82). The last couplet is unrhymed and contains an ominous threat: "We are all old-timers,/ each of us holds a locked razor" (82). The effect is of an even stronger mnemonic effect between *old-timers* and *locked razor* – just because the two phrases are positioned symmetrically but contain no rhyme where the analyst should expect one, we are forced to repeat them until a mnemonic link is established. The effect is clear – a return to the first stanza and the *spear* hurtling towards the *mentally ill* (*the thoroughbred whales*) who/which have lost their humanity, a modern incarnation of the zoomorphic characters from H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. The ending of the last stanza reads as an inversed metamorphosis – resurgent humanity reacting to the armed threat of the *harpoon*, evoking the revolt of the humans-animals returning to their animality. In this, they anticipate Randle McMurphy from Kesey's novel and stand ready for a revenge on a Nurse Ratched prototype – the nameless night attendant.

II. Anne Sexton and "You, Doctor Martin", *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960)

This poem by Sexton is from her acclaimed collection about the time spend in hospital and has her own therapist, Dr. Martin T. Orne as one of the protagonists, the other protagonist, just like in Lowell's poem, is the lyrical 'I' (the speaker) who talks about herself and the way she feels, rendering her perceptions of the therapist and of the other inmates in a mental hospital.

The speaker begins by addressing the doctor called Martin: "You, Doctor Martin, walk/ from breakfast to madness" (3). The beginning is quite unusual and suggests that only the morning may retain some sense of recognizable normality. The speaker's activity is given in a parallel line: "I speed through the antiseptic tunnel/ where the moving dead still talk" (3). The *antiseptic tunnel* or disinfectant tunnel is a place designated for the sick – it is a different kind of space – the doctor can move everywhere, but eventually ends in *madness* while the sick speaker is prosaically obliged to walk through a narrow space where chemical substances are applied to the body. The other patients are devoid of life – they are *the moving dead* who do not even know it, by still talking. The end of the first line is in the strong masculine rhyme – *walk*, dominating the poem's irregular meter, which, two lines down, rhymes with *talk*, the irregularity of the meter signaling meaningful changes of scene. This rhyming connection creates a strong sensation of the doctor walking to *madness* contrasted to the living dead *talking* away. The doctor is also confined to a mechanical movement, while the patients can only talk in their failure to realize that they no longer belong to the living. On the other hand, and by extension, through his senseless mechanical action, the doctor himself is already dead, but unlike Lowell's night attendant, the patient from "Waking in the Blue" (81), in the beginning, can look on him with a loving eye, addressing him by his name, which still means something, everything, to the ones who are dead, but do not know it. In the next line, we have the physical sensation of anatomic parts reacting to the *cure* which is depicted as an abrasive action of a foreign body: "of pushing their bones against the thrust/ of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel/ or the laughing bee on a stalk" (3). The introduction to the next line is effectuated through the natural interval between the lines and we have: "of death.

We stand in broken/ lines and wait while they unlock/ the door and count us at the frozen gates/ of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken/ and we move to gravy in our smock/ of smiles. We chew in rows, our plates/ scratch and whine like chalk" (3). Eating in the hospital for the mentally ill is also very mechanical, the mouths move and smile, but the smiles are given in the surprising collective noun – *smock/ of smiles* being separated by a line interval, the usual for this poem carefully constructed structure of word combinations which astonish.

In the next lines we learn that: "there are no knives/ for cutting your throat" (3), which sounds sinister enough, being an abrupt change of tone. We should probably understand that this is just a precaution, but the speaker never clarifies that because while she mingles with the other inmates, she can no longer be responsible for any of the actions on part of the *mentally ill*. The speaker then proceeds by saying that she is given an occupation – *making moccasins* as a kind of work to keep her busy, but she is unable to do it properly (not that it matters) as her movements are uncoordinated. The next stanza portrays the doctor as a "god of our block, prince of all the foxes" (3). The doctor also "lean[s] above the plastic sky" (3) controlling everything in a synthetic world with a *third eye*, but this is just his mechanical evolution into an advanced automaton, the one from Lowell's poem, because his eyesight is improved through an augmented reality enhancement, and he scans with it "the separate boxes/ where we [they] sleep or cry" (4). Sexton strongly suggests that it makes no difference to the doctor if they do one or the other possibly because he does not think that mad persons can feel pain or perhaps because they do not even know why they are crying.

In the next stanza Sexton develops further Lowell's idea of the *people-whales* having lost their ability to reason. In her poem she exclaims: "what large children we are" (4). The doctor has "an oracular/ eye in our nest" (4) – yet another precursor of Kesey's famous title. As the poem progresses, we may even forget that the speaker addressed the doctor by his name in the very first line. To the reader he has become a sort of a robot performing mechanical actions with Robocop abilities including a Foucauldian panoptical eye for total control. The speaker gives further details about the doctor's inhumanity by evoking a scene from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936): "Out in the hall/ the intercom pages you/ you twist in the pull/ of the foxy children who fall"

(4). The inmates turn into some cartoonish characters who look grotesque while the doctor is still in control and, insensitive to their plight – since he does not see them as human beings with a heart and a soul – he can dispense with their lives at will, his only purpose becoming his ultimate goal, to stay, at all cost, in control.

In the last stanza, the inmates, with whom the speaker has identified herself, already see themselves, not through the doctor's all-seeing, but through their own, equally powerful eye, as pure magic: "And we are magic talking to itself/ noisy and alone" (4). All the voices have lost their meanings, their voices produce some sort of gibberish or glib talk whose semantics are immaterial. So, the speaker proceeds: "I am queen of all my sins/ forgotten/ Am I still lost?" (4). The doctor's management has created an order of *confusion*. The survivors appear to be orderly but are lost on the inside. The speaker is still the mistress of her personal self, she is able to acknowledge her femininity, but all links to its functionality are missing – the sins connecting her to her human feminine self. The ending is powerful and brilliant: "Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,/ counting this row and that row of moccasins/ waiting on the silent shelf" (4).

In this daily routine of survival and effort to stay sane when she is considered mad, the speaker is stripped of everything that once made her a fully functional beautiful woman. The imagery used creates an acute perception of similarity to Emily Dickinson's "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed". "The inebriate of air and debauchee of dew" (72) from Dickinson's poem is completely free and rejoiceful out in the open. In Sexton's poem we have the captive "queen" daydreaming, comparing herself to a bee, related to Dickinson's "drunken bee" (72). The frolicsome sensitive feminine self can still be seen through the descending veil of stupor. Having turned herself into the defective cog in a machine, she is already probably no different from all the other inmates with more imagery of organic matter identifying with the inorganic – *herself* (her true self) and the *silent shelf*. If we return to the beginning of the poem, it is only in the morning that the doctor has his name. By the end of the day *madness* reigns supreme for everyone and he is no less dead or mad than the inmates.

III. Sylvia Plath and "Never Try to Trick Me with a Kiss", *The Collected Poems* (1981)

Part of the labeled by Ted Hughes *Juvenilia* from Plath's Pulitzer winning collection, this popular early poem shows Plath's preoccupation with form, being written in the rima terza fashion. He dates all poems from this section to 3 or 4 years preceding the fateful 1956 – the year of their marriage. While the poem may have been influenced by the instructions given at the Smith College by her English professor, Alfred Young Fisher, it bears the burgeoning bud of originality in the *Ariel* poems as well as some playful but surprisingly poignant observations on part of Plath while in hospital.

The poem begins with a warning which sounds half serious, half in jest: "Never try to trick me with a kiss/ Pretending that the birds are here to stay/ The dying man will scoff in scorn at this" (*CP* 319). The opening admonishes against trying to trick the speaker with a kiss, obviously referring to manipulative action on part of the others who may want to take advantage of the seeming gullibility of the visibly young lyrical 'I'. The speaker insists that she be treated with dignity and honesty and not with false promises about some rosy pictures which will never come true. The dying man from the next line identifies with the speaker. And, suddenly, to our surprise, the speaker, while so very young, will not disarm with her naiveté, but rather with this striking identification – her documented encounter with death. While this sensation persists, the speaker remains young and imposingly precocious, refusing to be treated lightly.

The next stanza builds up on the first by reminding the reader that it is not always easy to recognize it when someone has no heart, hence has lost his or her capacity to feel – he or she may have metaphorically a stone there instead, a possible allusion to the fairy tale "A Heart of Stone" by Wilhelm Hauff: "A stone can masquerade where no heart is/ And virgins rise where lustful Venus lay:/ Never try to trick me with a kiss" (*CP* 319). The next line quickly changes the philosophical reflections and refers the reader to Roman mythology. The allusion suggests that in our modern world things not uncommonly lose or

change their heterotopia[21] and acquire new functions. Therefore, where lust has thrived, virgins may blossom or vice versa, or, as Shakespeare says in Sonnet 18, "by chance, or nature's changing course untrimm'd" (147).

The next lines make a direct reference to the relationship patient – doctor: "Our noble doctor claims the pain is his,/ While stricken patients let him have his say;/ The dying man will scoff in scorn at this" (*CP* 320). In this tercet, similarly to Sexton's poem, the doctor in a way takes the law into his own hands and here has the arrogance to tell the patients that he is a victim of the system, possibly also an unrecognized patient himself. But Plath reminds us yet again about the honesty with which we should be treating the dying. They deserve to be told the truth, and so do young girls who have experienced death.

The next stanza takes a humorous turn while still appearing very serious: "Each virile bachelor dreads paralysis,/ The old maid in the gable cries all day:/ Never try to trick me with a kiss" (*CP* 320). The speaker enlarges the scope of the comparisons she makes, this time around giving solid proof of her worldly knowledge relegated to the other sex. And while she does so, the next line deals with everyday matters in a plummeting fall from the lofty preoccupations with the cowardly *bachelor* to the insignificant and inconsolable *old maid*, who, unlike the *bachelor*, *cries* for no obvious reason, perhaps foreseeing her own possible, but inacceptable future. Clearly a fact of life, it could be argued women may have serious reasons to be hysterical and they are people that should be reckoned with. Unfortunately, Plath was to experience that herself through her *(in)significant other* after having been abandoned by Hughes and even more so during her bouts of jealousy while he was still there. Being a smart versifier does not mean that this should be taken lightly, and Plath does not do it.

In the penultimate stanza Plath makes another allusion to mythology, to the Biblical snake that gave Adam the poisoned apple of knowledge since Adam and Eve may be *the mortal children* who want to lead a carefree existence: "The suave eternal serpents promise bliss/

[21] See Boev, Hristo. *Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos: Similarities, Differences, Continuities* (238 – 363); Boev, Hristo. *The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars* (113, 166, 167) – a. n.

To mortal children longing to be gay;/ The dying man will scoff in scorn at this" (*CP* 320). The last stanza is a quatrain containing, in the last two lines, the alternating refrains from the stanzas in a reversed order: "Sooner or later something goes amiss;/ The singing birds pack up and fly away;/ So never try to trick me with a kiss:/ The dying man will scoff in scorn at this" (*CP* 320). By way of conclusion, the speaker warns again that however well-constructed a hoax or an untruth, its tenability is eventually compromised, and the counterfeit is exposed. Plath also manages to make a neat loop with the recurrent image of the birds from the first stanza.

The three hospital poems show that there can be no taboos in poetry. Sexton's attests to a greater maturity, having been written by a person in her 30s while Plath's work demonstrates its author's control over form, Plath being in her very early 20s. Sexton also reveals a much more profound psychological experience and lexical variety, arising from the hospital stay with attention to detail, vivid hallucinatory imagery, and powerful messages. Lowell's and Sexton's offer fascinating insights into hospital interiors from the 1950s. Plath wags a warning finger that she should not be trifled with, exactly as Lowell came to realize, writing his "Forward" to *Ariel*. Even though almost everyone has come to appreciate the *Ariel* poems, Bloom notably excluded, it is little gems like this one, which, in their ambitious neatness, aiming for perfection, make one smile at the imperfection of the naïve attempt made by a young person who never truly believed she would grow old.

In the "Forward" to his book on Thomas, Ginsberg, Plath and Lowell, Simpson says the following about what he sees as their common trait: "The poets in this book created art out of the confusion of their lives. The Ginsberg in *Kaddish*, the Lowell in *Life Studies*, the Plath in *Ariel* are self-portraits, not literal representations. There is hardly any need for mirror images of life. The poets, however, were not always selective, and at times they lapsed into merely stating what they had seen and felt" (xiv). Simpson's evaluation and subsequent judgement of lived experience as perceived unworthy poet's food for the quill have proved to be premature, but they are worthy of being considered all the same, and so he continues, "now, in order for a man's feelings to be important in themselves he must be a kind of a saint.

Attention shifts from the work to the life, and the lives of most poets won't bear inspection" (xiv). Simpson continues with his criticism of the method thus: "So the poet works up his feelings, his occupation now is seeming to be sincere, and the fabric collapses. The mixture of life and poetry has been fatal in some cases. But there are signs that the vogue for confessional writing may be coming to an end" (xiv). Written in 1978, Simpson's book announces other poetical preoccupations which he believed would be more future proof. In that we know he was mistaken. We do not need to be *saints* to write autofiction. Nor do our lives need to be beautiful to look at to be turned into poetry or prose for that matter. If we look back in time, we may be able to trace confessionalist expression as early as Wordsworth, Keats, and Byron who, in their different ways of turning contemplation, communion with nature and swashbuckling adventure, respectively, into brilliant poetry, set the tone for this mode of poeticizing. It was Walt Whitman about 30 years later and on the other side of the Atlantic that in his "Song of Myself" proclaimed: "I celebrate myself,/ and what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (7).

What the confessionalists did, revisiting early 19th century poetical modernity, was do away with the conceited romantic conventions of recreating imaginative relived identifications with sterile open nature – Wordsworth's clouds, flowers, lakes, and grass or with symbolic mythological animals of the forest – as would be Keats's dryads, nymphs, squirrels, and nightingales. The 1950s poets turned their eyes on themselves and had the courage to offer verisimilar images of their selves as serious poetic subjects, exploring themselves and their poetic selves relentlessly, ruthlessly, arriving at images of themselves devoid of pity. And it is precisely because this endeavor would not always yield a pretty picture that they should be recognized as having been brave in sharing their possible ugliness and in inviting potential identifications on part of the reader who should doff his or her prudishness and respond to bravery in kind.

4. Life writing and the autofictional self: the capacity for expressing femininity

The confessional writing mode identifies as *autofiction* by default, but I will offer a larger definition of the term and the literature

that comes under this label with regards to the poets at-hand. In a recent study, *Autofiction in English* (2018) edited by Hywel Dix, there are many valuable and pertinent aspects that are discussed. In general, it is viewed as "writing of the 'I' (self)". By extension, it can be "historic, committed, anchored in individual and collective (his)story" (Grell vi). It has also been called "the writing of the knife" and according to Isabelle Grell, the author of the "Forward", it "can only be developed from persons, conscious of themselves and of the fact of living in a group that sustains them, denigrates them or simply ignores them, in a world where it is necessary to tell, just to tell, and tell justly, raising their own voice to divulge the flip side of life" (vi). Apart from claiming that autofiction tells the untellable, this also asks the question if writing as an omniscient narrator could make a case of autofiction. Lorna Martens answers it positively and gives numerous examples of the advantages of this approach – one of which would be that the story told could be even truer to life since the author would not feel the need for self-censorship (49). One could even argue for writing in the second person as a sort of a dialogue with oneself or an imaginary someone else to be yet another fascinating possibility, but this is indeed rare. However, in her poetry Plath used it to a tremendous effect in her "Daddy" and as Brain concludes: "the reader is simultaneously located as the person speaking and the person spoken to" (84), thus cementing a bond between them. As regards this definition, the confessional poets inscribe themselves completely in it, and Plath falls into this category also with her *The Bell Jar*, but this links them, as was already mentioned, to writers before them, as well as to writers who are our contemporaries as would be Paul Auster with his (1991-2008) *Leviathan*, *The Book of Illusions*, *Oracle Night*, *The Brooklyn Follies* (containing autofictional elements), Chris Kraus with *I Love Dick* (1997), Sheila Heti with *Motherhood* (2018), etc.

In general, autofictive writers have been through a personal trauma and would like to keep it for the world through the recorded memory of the experience, but that could also be a problem that has become a preoccupation for the writer, related to something he or she has been through. Grell also has the following to say: "What makes a person an author is that this person speaks to others of a life experience, reflects on it and transforms it in style into a book" (vii). Life writing

has two general modes: describing one's own experiences and describing someone else's accounts of lived experience – the biographical form. Research into the field has shown the mode to be extremely useful in developing a writing style through keeping journals or diaries. It also allows the uninhibited expression of feeling and emotion while preserving the thread of the story. Academic publications nowadays insist on an interdisciplinary approach with contributors from the complete spectrum of the Humanities. In terms of Plath's opera, her *Journals* and *Letters* certainly fall into this category while biographers have examined all the little details of hers and Anne Sexton's life, producing indispensable documents with an expressed author's opinion. It was a small, but very important step to be made towards her other prose – the short stories, novel, and poems – especially the very early and late poems where Plath by choosing the confessional mode, created autofictions. The differences between the two I see in the conscious modification of lived experience on part of the author while on part of the reader we may have the experience of fictional techniques such as fragmentation of the narrative, postponement of the denouement, creation of suspense, etc., with the author having preserved all the important elements of the actual lived experience in the autofictional text. There comes the question if every autobiographical piece of literature is autofiction. The answer, as the terminology suggests, is a resounding "Yes", provided that the autobiographical elements have been transformed into fiction in such a manner that the reader would not question the veracity of the story, that is, it would be read as fiction, even if it were 100% true to the actual experience. A novel like *Martin Eden*, for example, reads as fiction, is highly autobiographical, containing few modifications, reinventions of the self, as would be the main character's death – by jumping from a ship and swimming towards the bottom of the ocean, and the far more prosaic one of Jack London himself – with pills; the novel should be considered autofiction.

If we consider, for a moment, the rendition of the experience itself in a journal, for example, we will inevitably bump head-on into what has been considered a major issue of the term *lived experience*, and namely, the capacity of language to render into text what the author has been through. There is still the *intentionality* of the matter, which is

what exactly the author intends to consign to paper from what has happened. Irresolvable as this problem appears, it would suffice to admit to certain limitations. We should not forget that the act of writing the self is inevitably linked to "reinventing the self" as Serge Doubrovsky was to say or as Grell concludes, "in inscribing the subject in the world, it does not seek to, cannot, categorically refuses to flout the exteriority by which the 'I' is systematically unmade" (vii), that is, the writer refrains from pointing out where certain embellishments have been applied to the actual lived experience; therefore, there is no glorification of the autobiographical self (the writer). And by way of an indirect response to Simpson's and Bawer's accusations of *self-display*, Grell's conclusion is that "we are very far from the narcissism which the genre has been reproached with, from the mirage of a salutary catharsis on the part of the writer" (vii). Even if used as treatment, as it was suggested to Sexton by her therapist, writing could be much more useful and cathartic only for the reader – let us not forget that, whether in the confessional mode or not, writers such as Plath, Sexton, London, Woolf, Hemingway, Dubarova and D. F. Wallace did commit suicide, so they were not saved or cured by their own writing. In analyzing the reasons for Plath's suicide, Alvarez also says it: "for the artist himself art is not necessarily therapeutic; he is not automatically relieved of his fantasies by expressing them. […] The result of handling it in his work may well be that he finds himself living it out" (38). Alvarez proceeds by agreeing with Wilde: "For the artist, in short, nature often imitates art. […] when an artist holds a mirror up to nature, he finds out who and what he is; but the knowledge may change him irredeemably so that he becomes that image" (39).

The writers could, however, have been saved by their own reading as Lameyer suggests, referring to Sylvia being obsessed with Dostoyevsky and reading his works all the time – that they were more beneficial about her self-knowledge than any psychiatric session she had had (35). Perhaps in her final days, in spite of herself, Plath should have rarefied the writing at the expense of the reading, and by reading, I mean fiction as only fiction allows us to be transferred into dreamscapes and the answers that we seek may come hencewith. Insightfully, and in his case, prophetically, Wilde was to say in "De Profundis", two years prior to his death, "If I may not write beautiful

books, I may at least read beautiful books, and what joy can be greater?" (1428). In Serghi's *The Spider's Web*, her protagonist, Diana Slavu feels abandoned just as much as Plath did, reflecting the Romanian writer's own situation, but her suicidal thoughts eventually leave her, and she is able to recover from depression. In the book the remedy is not through reading (both Plath and Serghi in their novels repeatedly mention how hard it is to read in such a state), but having convalesced, this is one of the greatest joys that Diana rediscovers (480). Still, writing was used by all these authors to fight depression except for London and possibly Dubarova. Linda Sexton, Anne Sexton's daughter, has the following insightful memory of her mother's illness and writing: "What took her from us was not her desire to write, but her depression: when depression descended, she did not – could not – write much […] And so, even when I was young, I intuitively understood the magic creating a poem brought to her" (92).

So, I believe autofiction does what any kind of fiction does best – offers invaluable resources for people that can be found nowhere else against the assault of the mass-media, as synthesized neatly in the movie *Detachment* (2011). Also, it helps the reader resolve personal issues through reading – the solutions to the problems present themselves unexpectedly. And, very importantly, what Wallace proposed with his *Infinite Jest* – to keep people from being lonely. Aiming to offer multiple perspectives of actual lived experience and fictional selves during the 1950s, the study has made it its point to compare the representations in both journals and autofiction of numerous writers against whom Plath could size up with reference to disease and/or womanhood. Due to a certain condescension to the confessional mode, it was assumed that women would be more willing to write in this "unserious" manner but out of the important names, men dominated the field. So, the comparative analysis came to the conclusion that in the poems under scrutiny: "Never Try to Trick Me with a Kiss", "You, Doctor Martin", and "Waking in the Blue", Plath demonstrates a meticulous attention to compositional detail. Her rhythm, meter and rhyme are impeccable, which makes her poem somewhat stilted, sounding like something recited. She shows ambition and audacity, creating a poem with details that are surprisingly true to life for the capture of such a young poet as herself. Sexton shows

exquisite technique in rendering life in a psychiatric hospital – with many sinister details containing unspeakable horror. Yet, throughout, her poem remains highly melodious with haunting rhythms and rhymes, which adds an additional sense of terror, especially with the thickening of the lugubrious tones as the day in the poem progresses towards evening. The brilliant technique of the latter makes the whole poem read like a seamless smooth experience of transition, transformation, and madness. It should be noted that the three poems show a remarkable concern with transgressive knowledge: with Plath – seemingly innocent girls may have crystal clear ideas of gender-related problems; with Sexton – in the house of the mentally ill, this works like a virus, no one is safe, including the doctors; with Lowell – being confined to a mental hospital turns one into an animal, aggravating the problem, not resolving it. Lowell's poem is perhaps overly ambitious – with an excellent first stanza of first-class psychiatric hospital experience, we are plunged into history, which could be the deranged mind of the speaker, but still, it is unnecessarily distracting from the intensity of the opening scene. Certainly, it underscores men's vision of the world through a global perspective opposed to women's focus on the world we are living in and here it should be noted that Plath demonstrates a certain affinity for history, if from a woman's perspective.

As it has been demonstrated, Plath and Sexton lived in a very competitive world as far as it came to writing. They both had to prove their best to be able to stay abreast of the other fellow confessionalists and they all were clearly in competition although the men assumed, until the end of the decade, that the women could only be their disciples, which falls into the framework of a man-dominated epoch where women were expected to take their gender-determined roles in a patriarchal society – the humble respectful girl who was to be a lady among people, but with the covert sex-appeal of clothes that hinted at her femininity, left a lot for the male imagination. The natural evolution of this model was into the mother and the wife. There were the dissenters – the beats who practiced a free form of experiencing the 1950s – in a more commune-based kind of living – among whom some of the major writers of the Age – Kerouac, Kesey and Ginsberg. A strong reaction to the authoritarian post-WWII age, the beats and the confessionalists, in sharing the personal experience at the core of their

works, offered to the gaze of the world the "unpresentable" Mr. Hydish side of physically and psychologically tormented human beings who were not imbibed with an over-bloated image of their own egos, but with projections of sensitive despondent selves that were reaching out in a silent (nonverbalized outside their literary works) accord, an unuttered cry for help, which made them, on the outside, very much part of the "silent generation" like all the others. This perception was expressed by Al Alvarez himself who regretted not having seen Plath's poetry as exactly this desperate attempt at connecting to the others (*Sylvia Plath*) rather than the common for the Age perception of "narcissistic selves" who were advertising, quite inappropriately, their authors' repulsive unorthodox inner sides.

The Age, which required compliance from everyone, was more demanding to the women who did not have men's higher range of readily available personal choices as regards professional development or societal roles. Plath occupied several positions as a teacher, including one at Smith College which she had finished herself, but disliked the job since it interfered with her writing because it also required arduous preparation (Golden 255). A far more interesting position for her was the part-time job she obtained at the Psychiatric Clinic at Massachusetts General Hospital where she had been a patient and had to transcribe patients' dreams which is reflected in the prose collection *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. Certainly, there were almost no leadership positions available for ambitious women, and Plath did not want one. The most important thing for her was her writing and her family with Ted Hughes. It has been noted that part of her ambitious nature was succeeding as a mother (reflected in her *Journals* in her urgent desire to get pregnant), the rest would be poetry in the large sense of the word, comprising prose and verse. Even though subdued, femininity found its way into transgressive literature through both Plath's and Sexton's completely liberated portrayals of hospital experience and microscopic analyses of both the physiological and psychological dimensions of their selves, tackling "unacceptable topics" and discussing them adeptly and boldly which could make their fellow poets envious – by comparison; both Plath and Sexton proved themselves to be more intimately engaged with poetically unconventional topics, revelatory of the untenability of the attributed strict gender roles.

Undoubtedly, the portrayal of feminine sensibility by Plath and Sexton in this audacious uncompromising manner with regards to their women's nature, not to a certain feminist's agenda, can be seen as an empowerment of their feminine selves and by extension, of those of all women who could identify with such portrayals. Both their representations of femininity played a role in the better understanding of women in the decades that followed – the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Accepting with enthusiasm the ascribed to them roles of wives made them women of their times, but their writers' strong attitudes about this arrangement found an expression in works that show their feminine selves constantly involved in a rebellious gender game which is bound to continue in the psychiatric hospital where these roles are only perpetuated. The recognition of the isolated feminine self in both Sexton's and Plath's works called for a sense of community where the allotted roles could be more fluid as in John Varley's acclaimed postapocalyptic post-hippie *The Persistence of Vision* (1978) or drastically opposed as in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), both accentuating the untenability of such a sharp division.

Not only Plath but all female writers under consideration, through their works about themselves will be shown to offer to the reader what Tracy Brain in her "Introduction" to the 2019 essay collection has called "the art of self-performance" (7), but as Oates reminds us through her advice to the critics about Plath, "What needs desperately to be seen is how she performed for us, and perhaps in place of some of us" (207). In this study I examine the performative feminine selves of Plath in comparison to those of other women writers, constructing an intercultural dialogue reaching out for Jean Jacques Goldman's mythological "*Là-bas*" beyond the country of origin and sometimes culture of origin, being only part of the women writers' daydreaming in their own times. Here it should be said that Sexton found Massachusetts sufficient for a lifetime, never quite losing touch with the ocean.

The short biography and cultural background presented here have elucidated the difficult path Plath walked to reach the highest summits of writing crafts(wo)manship. How her feminine selves manifest themselves and perform in more pieces of her writing, remains to be seen in comparison with others.

CHAPTER 2: ALICE IN BORDERLAND: LIFE AS MAGIC – THE GIRLS AND THE SEA

1. Childhood on their minds: Plath, Sexton and Dubarova

Although Aurelia Plath, in the documentary *Sylvia Plath*, says that her daughter started keeping a diary since the age of 10, the age that Plath actually started doing is considered to be the age of 11. Unfortunately, the earliest that has been preserved starts with 1950, that is her Smith years, and continues until 1962. The entries from 1963 were removed by Hughes himself, one is to understand – for educational purposes. The entries preceding the year 1950 are lost[22], and unless they resurface miraculously like the headline-making 2017 *Letters* shedding light on Plath's miscarriage, they will remain lost to research forever. Still, the *Journals* contain valuable references to her childhood from the point of view of the reminiscences of a young woman poet advancing towards her 30s – in the creative laboratory of writing the self, offering important metacritical data. There is more immediate information about experiencing childhood in the *Letters*, both documents pretending to have the maximum possible completion by the date of publication in 2007 and 2017, respectively, and edited by Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil. With the added stories to *Johnny Panic* from the 2001 edition, Plath's childhood has acquired a tangibility that will allow the effectuation of the proposed discourse. In the case of Sexton, attention will be paid mainly to her remarkable early poetic breakthrough, the collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). Her poems are here analyzed against information from the biographies by Diane Middlebrook and Linda Sexton. That will not be the only poem collection to be discussed though since with Sexton, any poem may signal a spatial, linguistic, or communicative transgression identifiable with an aspect from Lewis Carroll's classic, and the poet,

[22] There is a novel by Kimberley Knutsen called *The Lost Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2015). – a. n.

herself, never quite seemed to have grown up, remaining a sort of an overgrown candidly indecorous female Peter Pan.

The young Plath in her *Juvenilia* poems and *Johnny Panic* prose will also be compared to the Bulgarian poet Petya Dubarova who wrote mostly poetry, but also prose including a journal which has been published recently in its incompletion. What formally brings Dubarova close to Plath was the fact that she also lived in the Cold War period but on the other side of the Berlin Wall, in Bulgaria, and so had the Comecon experience. Strikingly original for Bulgaria, with her natural rhymes, highly melodious idiom, cosmic tones, sense of magic and belonging, as well as with the intense portrayals of city- and seascapes, Burgas and the Black Sea, she is the definitive Bulgarian poet of childhood and the sea. Writing about herself as a subject, Dubarova was part of an extant movement of excellent poets who also wrote confessionally such as Konstantin Pavlov, Hristo Fotev, Alexander Gerov, Ekaterina Yosifova and Boris Hristov and by writing in this mode they emphasized on the personal experience as opposed to ideologically important topics. Dubarova was fond of listening to Pink Floyd, Smoky and the Beatles and that alone shows a clear dissenting attitude towards the communist regime which did not tolerate Western rock music. She translated some of their songs which in her translation sound so much like the rest of her poetry that they are rather free adaptations than true translations. Elitsa Dubarova, her sister, from the "Forward" to the 2015 two-volume edition of her prose and poetry reports that Dubarova was published in a European anthology called *Passages* (2001) alongside Goethe, Petrarch, and Shakespeare. Also, her poetry has been translated into English in a book called *Here I Am, In Perfect Leaf Today*[23] and launched in the USA in 1992 (1: 9). In 2012 a conference was held on her life and works, the second to date: "Petya Dubarova's Works in the Bulgarian and European Literary Context", commemorating and celebrating the life and works of the young poet. Even though Dubarova's poetry was hidden from the public space in the form of books, it lived in its less rebellious manifestations in

[23] For the sake of consistency of the text in prose and poetry, as well as because of my disagreement with some of the translator's decisions made by Dan D. Wilson of Dubarova's poems, the cited texts will be in the translation of the author of this study. – a. n.

numerous adept adaptations to Bulgarian pop music in the 1980s, the so-called *estrada*, which showcased the unusual for Bulgarian signature high sonority of Dubarova's poetry and her strikingly original metaphors. Her texts revelatory of a good-natured child resonated with the innate melodramatics of that kind of music and so with them it suddenly sounded more meaningful and profound. Ironically, Dubarova who liked rock, came to be linked to pop music. Many were wondering if she was alive since that was the only time they heard of her – when the songs were announced and then they heard who the author of the lyrics was. Eventually in the late 1980s and early 1990s people came to the conclusion that Dubarova was an obscure lyrics writer for Bulgarian *estrada*.

There are many more points of similarity with Plath, Sexton and Dubarova that will be examined here, bringing Plath and Dubarova very close: the important theme of the sea in the Bulgarian poet's childhood, the fact that she wrote in a manner which was based on personal experiences, the introvert character of both her prose and poetry, the reflection of the epoch in her works and her tragic end only at the age of 17 through suicide in 1979, one year after the death of the Bulgarian dissident, Georgi Markov through the criminal umbrella poisoning. Dubarova may have suffered from depression herself although she mentions in her journal that she was naturally happy and did not need special occasions for that; her early poetry is also sparkling with exuberance. However, her death caused by taking sleeping pills also brings her close to Plath in one of the American poet's unsuccessful attempts to curb her life. Just like Plath, her journal is unfinished since only excerpts from it have been published, possibly potentially hiding family secrets or a particularly unpleasant exposure of the communist regime which is supposed to have been gone since 1989. As a reason for her suicide[24] has been cited an unfortunate incident when she was unjustly accused of damaging some factory equipment during a school

[24] In *The Bell Jar* Plath suggests that only psychiatrists should be held responsible for the patients' suicides: "And then Doctor Nolan told me how the best of psychiatrists have suicides among their patients, and how they, if anybody, should be held responsible, but how they, on the contrary, do not hold themselves responsible" (253). Still, Dubarova may not have been suicidal at all. Much less than Plath's texts hers offer little evidence to that effect. – a. n.

brigade – for producing Burgas beer[25]. Such a possible cause for her extreme gest should not be dismissed lightly. Bulgarian schools were excessively cruel in punishing school students who were perceived by the authorities to be a threat for the public morals, especially if the respective students' parents were political nobodies, a process demonstrated to a great effect in the movie *Yesterday* (*Вчера*) from 1987 based on the eponymous novella by Vlado Daverov. Dubarova's journal entries and poems about school are numerous and gradually the communist school emerges as a sinister inhuman institution which aims to crush students' creativity and emotions.

Like Plath, Dubarova also wrote prose: short stories, letters, and a journal and again like Plath, they are all very intimate and offer bits and pieces of valuable autobiographical information. And again, like Plath, occasionally one can compare the same happening becoming an event in all three forms. Surprisingly, in the two-volume edition from 2015 there are numerous short story entries from 1979 which are quite insightful of life in the 1970s from the point of view of a modern Bulgarian girl – school pressure, boys playing the guitar, boys and girls singing in secluded city gardens, smoking cigarettes, whispers in the dark, stolen kisses, boy dreaming. In Dubarova's journal she dreams of a blond boy (2: 195) while Plath confesses to fancying life with a Russian boy (*J* 46). Just like Plath, Dubarova wrote numerous letters, mostly to her parents from school brigades and camps, but there are also known letters to a Swedish boy called Per whom she met at a disco in Borovets, Bulgaria in 1978, which, together with other texts by both, attests to a certain racial preference for white-colored people, a longing for the blond East/ West, respectively.

Although her poetry towards the year 1979 becomes increasingly grim in tone and the journal entries from the same year occasionally show signs of despondency, the short stories remain very lively where little incidents related to teenage life are presented in great and vivid detail. The last entry from her published journal is from 08 September 1979 where she writes that she feels happy in view of the forthcoming

[25] See Pencho Kovachev's article about Petya Dubarova's note before her death on bg-voice.com as of 19 March 2014. – https://bg-voice.com/zagaduchnoto_predsmurtno_pismo_na_petya_dubarova/ –.a. n.

9th of September and that she wants to have a baby and she would like to have more than two children[26] (2: 204). Dubarova, like Plath, loved sunbathing and bronzing up until from her beloved white in the summer she often turned almost black.

If Butscher could be considered right that Plath's increasingly angry and grim poetry does not give enough indications as to the cause of the poet's extreme gest (20), the newly published letters and the known details from all sources become compelling circumstantial evidence. Unlike the note to the doctor's phone number that Plath left, Dubarova even in her last gesture is eerily literary, leaving a mystery which remains unsolved to date:

Deceived
Youth
Forgiveness
Dream
Memory
Behind the walls of the big house
SECRET (1: 218)

An act of "minimal freedom" (87) as Alvarez terms it, in dark totalitarian times it meant robbing the state of its total control over the individual and so he suggests: "Perhaps this is why totalitarian states feel cheated when their victims take their own lives" (87). But there is more to it, the artist is expected to comply with the demands of the totalitarian state and thus produce propaganda under an art form. There is little evidence that Dubarova complied (perhaps unconsciously through her patriotic poetry) and so Alvarez concludes: "The artist who

[26] In *The Bell Jar* Plath meditates on the pain and uncertainty of being a woman, hence her symbolic hemorrhage upon losing her virginity, feeling "part of a great tradition" (242). But her hemorrhagic state creates a strong sense of insecurity in herself: "Perhaps Irwin had injured me in some awful, obscure way, and all the while I lay there on Joan's sofa I was really dying" (244). Dubarova did not manage to have children, but Plath did – and she had two – what Dubarova desired for herself. The described seemingly incessant hemorrhage in *The Bell Jar* is also symbolic of the woman condition in both literature and in life, of the precarious state in which a woman always finds herself but also of her suggested indefatigable strength to brave time and time again the contingencies of child-bearing: "I remembered a worrisome course in the Victorian novel where woman after woman died, palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth" (244). Two major examples are the opening scenes of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *Dombey and Son*. – a. n.

refuses this role refuses everything; he becomes superfluous. In these circumstances the price of art in the traditional sense and with its traditional values is suicide – or silence, which amounts to the same thing" (247).

Because no conclusive information has been obtained as to what exactly brought Dubarova to her tragic decision, undoubtedly a combination of factors, it may be safely assumed that her death will remain yet another shameful secret of the Bulgarian communist past. The failure to provide any satisfactory explanation to date puts one more stain on Bulgaria's painful transition to democracy, adding yet another question mark to this uneasy process.

2. Growing up near the sea in their works: place, space, and event

Unlike Plath who spent her childhood in Massachusetts but was traveling intensively to England and back in the mid-and late 1950s, Sexton spent her time almost entirely near the ocean, and the sea is a recurrent theme in her poems – it is ever present and invariably different. Even though she had an almost constant contact with it, childhood kept reappearing every time when she was near it. The ocean thus becomes a locus of heterotopic experiences, an element that underscores Heidegger's idea of the resident's being in a *place* and dwelling in its appertaining *spaces*[27] (Heidegger 65; Malpas 230). Malpas also develops the idea of the relationship between *place* and *event* – the place always seen in the process of transpiring, "taking place" (Malpas 221), never ceasing to change. The *event* itself can be seen as a "disclosive happening of belonging"[28] (223), that is the events in the discussed works by Plath, Sexton and Dubarova will be viewed as being revelatory of the girls' belonging to Massachusetts and Burgas, respectively, and their having had their childhood near the sea.

[27] Also discussed in *Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos: Similarities, Differences, Continuities* (30) and *The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars* (92). – a. n.
[28] Ibid., 226, 92. – a. n.

2.1. Anne Sexton and the ocean – a childhood that never ended: the *Poems*

Like Sylvia Plath, Anne Gray (Harvey) Sexton was born in Massachusetts, not in Boston, but in Newton, on 9 November 1928 which makes her 4 years older than Sylvia considering the date of birth. The distance between the two places is less than 8 miles which makes Sylvia and Anne almost hailing from the same location. Anne was the youngest of three daughters. It seems Anne loved to feel the warmth of the others around her from an early age. Middlebrook mentions that being "the baby of the family, […] she loved to be cuddled" (7). Regular drinking seems to have been the norm in the family and in this aspect, Anne identifies with her mother saying that she "would rather be regarded as a drunk than as an alcoholic" (13). Although mental illness and heavy drinking were not an unusual sight for her that does not seem to have caused major issues for Anne's peace of mind – she was used to them (Middlebrook 13-16). Being a pampered girl allowed Anne to taste fully of the fashions in the mid-1940s. She had her first kiss at the age of 14 from an English boy who had come to Weston, Massachusetts to spend time with relatives while the war lasted. Later, when her selected poems were published in 1964, he wrote her from England to complain about having been rejected by her and she replied with a "teasing letter: 'I should have married you then and there, it would have saved me a lot of money to be married to a psychiatrist" (Middlebrook 17). As it can be seen, Anne was much more liberated in her ways with boys and, obviously, had much more free time to dedicate to that activity, not having gone to college, but eloping right after high school with the man who was to become her husband. Unlike Sylvia, she had not suffered the loss of somebody very close to her, so her mental issues began around 1956, when Sylvia got married in England. Unlike Sylvia again, she officially divorced, but kept her family name Sexton as a published poet.

Just like in Plath's works, the ocean is palpably present in Sexton's poems. For example, in "Kind Sir: These Woods" from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), in iambic pentameter, we have a story told to an imaginary *Kind Sir* and we can feel the surreal, but tangible proximity of the salty water: "in late August, when the cold fog blew in/ off the ocean, the forest between Dingley Dell/ and

grandfather's cottage grew white and strange" (4). The recreation of the sounds and motions of the sea and the nearby area are enhanced by "the coast's/ cry of doom from that far away bell buoy's bell" (4). The poem continues with a game played between the lyrical 'I' and the imaginary gentleman in which the speaker reminisces about her childhood. The magic of the game – turning around twice and reproducing the captured images beforehand, compared to what the shut eyes will see after the turning, is a difference between reality and imagination as Sexton says, "this inward look that society scorns" (5). The poem ends upon an ironic note – in the bleak coastal land with a forest the worst thing found is the speaker herself "caught between the grapes and the thorns" (5). The game represented with vivid imagery is played by children all over the world. Sexton, however, manages to preserve the sense of the wonder of it – as a key to a child's wonderful imagination, but also to the desire to test that "inward look" right there and then without preparation. The return to reality finds her entangled in the thicket around, which stands at variance with the images produced inside her turning head, leading to the conclusion that the eyesight may not be needed when our imagination is unleashed, as well as that returning to our unaffected senses may not yield something extraordinary.

In "Torn down from Glory Daily" from the same poems collection we have yet another touch with childhood near the cosmic blue of the ocean. The opening stanza puts the speaker, who is not alone, in the position of a passive observer describing the scenery without any human presence: "All day we watched the gulls/ striking the top of the sky/ and riding the blown roller coaster./ Up there/ godding the whole blue world/ and shrieking at a snip of land" (5). Sexton creates an atmosphere where the human beings are redundant or, at most, they could inscribe themselves in the coastal scene as unobtrusively as possible. In their desire to establish a contact with the *gods of the sea*, the children decide to wheedle them into alighting on the beach by "leaving six crusts [of dinner rolls] for an early king" (5). A reconnaissance member of the winged flock is finally persuaded to come closer and bring the rest, its probing movements being described in detail. The speaker recalls the closest a human being can get to appropriating the areal freedom of the birds in a reversed description of that person who is to "climb the air" (8), which can only be found in a

circus performance, reproducing the world outside with its artificial earth and sky. In recreating the sensations of a daydream, the speaker intimates that she *loved* that person who is presented as "the naughty clown" (8). Ironically, the reproduction of the total freedom and air control of the seagulls is the circus where the person braving gravity can only be tragicomic for everyone but the speaker.

In "Letter Written on a Ferry while Crossing Long Island Sound", *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) Sexton yet again presents her observing speaker who is watching the ocean, reconstructing past childhood through the sea-brought memory connecting her to her grandfather, being her adult self, "holding my wallet, my cigarettes/ and my car keys/ at 2 o'clock on a Tuesday/ in August in 1960" (81). The moment is captured precisely in time against the eternal face of the ocean with its ever-changing surface, always different and always the same: "without miracles of rage/ or unusual hope, grown rough and wrinkled/ with incurable age" (81). Sexton instills the sensation of the total insignificance and silly vanity of human history which bears no change on the ocean. There are people she knows whose faces look the same, hence their inscrutable wisdom.

In "Imitations of Drowning" from the same poems collection, Sexton is again in her adult self, still reminiscing about childhood – she is contemplating drowning as a process of connecting more intimately with the ocean and carefree days long gone. The crystal-clear water is being compared to "the gin I [she] drink[s] each day at half-past five" (108). Still the sensation of the actual drowning is striking in imagery and downright unnerving: "I grapple with eels like ropes – it's ether, it's queer/ and then, at last, it's done" (108) This possible death is envisioned in graphic details and the body of the *pestilential rat* from her posthumous "Rowing", *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975) is finally surrendered to the ravenous scavengers coming "to clean up the ocean floor" (108). These scenes of disposal of the sinful body are pleasant for the speaker, but the lyrical 'I' insists: "real drowning is for someone else. It's too big/ to put in your mouth on purpose, it puts hot stingers in your tongue and vomit in your nose as your lungs break./ Tossed like a wet dog by that juggler, you die awake" (108). The sensation of the actual drowning is nauseous and despite its cleaning attractiveness, it is too much to bear as an actual experience. Therefore,

realizing her limitations, the speaker is dragged out, "dribbling urine on the gritty shore" (109), small and insignificant, incapable of a glorious death as would be that of the drowning, subjected to the manipulations of a mad *juggler* (the ocean).

In "Now", *Love Poems* (1969) childhood is revived yet again in a frolicsome game with the lover who is being brought back as a memory tasting of eternity in the form of the ocean: "Then you taste of the ocean./ One day you huddled into a grief ball,/ hurled into the corner like a schoolboy" (202). The poem continues with the transformations of the room arising from the love-making which rejuvenates the two lovers, thus connecting them to games children play: "We are in our room. We are in a shoe box. We are in a blood box. We are delicately bruised, yet we are not old and not stillborn" (202). Sexton's connection to the ocean throughout her poems is intimate since, as it has already been mentioned, she was never far from it, and she could, consequently, relate to it, invariably finding newer striking lines of identification, the ocean reflecting in full her functioning as a woman, cosmic, powerful, and eternal, as exemplified in the poems "The Sea Corpse" (551) and "The Consecrating Mother" (554), also published posthumously.

2.2. Sylvia Plath and the ocean – a childhood that did not last too long: the *Journals* and the *Letters*

What Sexton did in life, Plath fantasized about. In her *Unabridged Journals*, in 1950, Plath wrote: "Every story, every incident, every bit of conversation is raw material for me. My love's not impersonal yet not wholly subjective either. I would like to be everyone, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then come back to write about my thoughts, my emotions, as that person" (*J* 9). The desire for all-encompassing human knowledge from the perspective of feminine experience was evidently resurgent in Plath, too, including her striking fantasy from the 3rd entry – of "being raped" (*J* 8), being a virgin. Plath's *Journals*, like her *Letters*, were never meant to be published; they were supposed to be that mirror on the wall in which she could look at herself and share, with herself, her most intimate thoughts, being completely honest, without any self-censorship, "the writing of the knife" (Grell vi). However, Plath herself admits to the practice having its intrinsic limitations, which yet again questions the veracity and

completion of rendering lived experience into a journal: "you cannot regard your own life with objective curiosity all the time…" (*J* 9). Plath continues in the following insightful glimpse of what constitutes the technique of the *Journals* and the *Letters*: "With me, the present is forever, and forever is always shifting, flowing, melting. This second is life. And when it is gone, it is dead. But you can't start over with each new second. You have to judge by what is dead. It's like quicksand… hopeless from the start. A story, a picture, can renew sensation a little, but not enough, not enough. Nothing is real except the present" (*J* 9). In this short excerpt Plath manages to address one of the two aspects of lived experience in this study, and of phenomenological analysis in general – what and how much is transferred on to paper from what is already dead and gone as experience. In that Plath summarizes neatly Virginia Woolf's concerns about diary-keeping influenced by intentionality and mood. There will be moments that will be more emotionally charged, and which will cause a larger exposition with some distortion of the described event at the expense of others, which will occasion a more concise matter-of-fact registering of the happening. There is also the delayed reevaluation as to the real importance of a certain event for the writer: "Someday I may say: It was of great significance that I sat and laughed at myself in a convertible with the rain coming down in rattling sheets on the canvas roof. It influenced my life that I did not find content immediately and easily – and now I am I because of that" (*J* 24). With these thoughts Plath also addresses Husserl's term of "retention" – retaining the consciousness of the past moment in an ever-fading present (Husserl 169). The eighteen-year-old Plath ends her reflections on the principles of keeping a diary, which, especially with the missing first 7 years, reads like a novel, refreshingly unconcerned with the sense of composition, but not with style – captured dialogues, poetic night scenes, intense interactions with members of the other sex, soul-searching, and reaching out in a Pink Floyd "Hey You" kind of way: "I could smash the measured clicking sound that haunts me – draining away life, and dreams, and idle reveries. Hard, sharp, ticks. I hate them. Measuring thought, infinite space, by cogs and wheels" (*J* 25). And then belittled by the apparent impossibility of the task, Plath asks: "Can you understand? Someone, somewhere, can you understand me a little, love me a little? For all my

despair, for all my ideals, for all that – I love life. But it is hard, and I have so much – so very much to learn "(*J* 25). This short passage synthesizes wonderfully, I believe, all the elements of the young writer's consciousness – the mask of the ambitious girl-woman determined to prove herself as a person of letters in a man's world and the brittle tender girl who needs love and understanding, just a little. Rather than socialize, in the year 1950 Plath seems to have preferred to analyze and relive the daily occurrences in writing, self-consciously recognizing the limitations of her capacity of self-expression:

> Here I am, a bundle of past recollections and future dreams, knotted up in a reasonably attractive bundle of flesh. I remember what this flesh has gone through; I dream of what it may go through. I record here the actions of optical nerves, of taste buds, of sensory perception. And I think: I am but one more drop in the great sea of matter, defined, with the ability to realize my existence. Of the millions, I, too, was potentially everything at birth. I, too, was stunted, narrowed, warped, by my environment, my outcroppings of heredity (*J* 30).

The information concerning Plath's childhood and obtained from the journal entries was rendered there from the distance and further warping of the memory. It was through the same prism that her short stories about that period were written, too. Their capacity of evoking a memorable scene that illuminates an important moment through the liberating effect of autofiction is very important. The *Journal* entries may have served as a foundation on which to build the story, motioning the spotlight over the respective event, that is, the *Journals* that are now lost. As for Plath's *Letters*, the most recent edition will be used, the two volumes from 2017 and 2018, respectively – and they contain over "1,390 letters to more than 140 correspondents" (Steinberg and Kukil 9). The *Letters* start from the year 1940 when Sylvia Plath was 8 years old. As such, they provide invaluable information about her very early writing, as well as her evolving writing techniques. As veritable lived experience, they, too, should be taken with a pinch of salt for the simple reason that they have concrete recipients and, as with the others, that takes us to their author's realized intentionality. Still, the combined usage of all four (journals, letters, poems, short stories) will provide, I believe, a reconstructed picture of Plath's childhood that will allow us to see Plath's feminine selves in the different modes of life writing.

Thinking of the daunting task of describing a childhood incident from memory, Plath engages into a stream of consciousness exercise since, as she declares, she has "no memory" (*J* 305). And then she goes:

> Yes, there was a circle of lilac bushes outside Freeman's yellow house. Begin there: 10 years of childhood before the slick adolescent years, & then my diaries to work on: to reconstruct. Two popular trees, green & orange striped awnings. I never learned to look at details. Recreate life lived: that is renewed life. The incident goes down, a grit in the eye of god, and is wept forth a hundred years and a day hence, a globed iridescent pearl world – turn the glass globe and the snow falls slowly through rods of quartz air. Metaphors crowd. Pellets of fact drop into the mind's glass of clear liquor and unfold petal by petal, red, blue, green, or pink and white – paper flowers creating an illusion of a world. Every world crowns its own kings, laurels it[s] own gods. A Hans Anders[e]on book cover opens its worlds: the snowqueen[29], bluewhite as ice, […] open Alice's door, work & sweat to pry open gates & speak out words & worlds (*J* 305).

The brainstorming exercise Plath uses to think of an incident from her childhood exposes the process of creating such stories from memory, based on free associations that were tangent on the actual event. Among others, Andersen's Ice Queen from his *Fairy Tales* and Lewis Carroll's Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* inevitably appear. Child-like activities, however, break the tedium of dating whenever Plath finds herself near the ocean in Boston:

> July 19 – This morning I awoke into dampness, the windows white and vague with fog. This afternoon, while all the family was out the first big storm came. I had just washed my hair, and the rain began, big, wet drops from the great spread of sky […] I could look through the screen to the wildly heaving trees, the gray ocean, angry with white foam, the crackling blasts of sheet lightning and the immediate whip cracks and rattling, banging, earsplitting bursts of thunder. Water ran in rivers down the pavement, and suddenly I remembered to shut the windows. But even as I ran from room to room, trying to close the fourteen or fifteen windows on the side where the rain was coming in, it was too late, and the sills were wet with puddles, and the water was collecting in streams along the floor (*J* 77).

[29] The orthography of the original has been preserved in quotes. – a. n.

The description above allows us to see the young Plath, like Sexton, identifying with the child when near the ocean. Even though she is occupied with counting windows, we are being presented with a highly poetical but controlled portrayal of the rainstorm and the ocean, that is, the hectic involvement of the speaker in preventing the water from flooding the many rooms of the house (judging by the number of windows). Despite the heavy metaphorical usage throughout the description, it does not appear overburdened, but does feel a bit less polished than Sexton's descriptions of the sea. Just like in Sexton, more often than not, we have a transgressive intervention on part of the speaker – not in this description. In the *Journals* we have descriptions of the sea that experiment with colors – obviously, a good exercise for descriptive writing by Plath. Most of them are very good, with a few of them appearing overdone in the composite color effect, and cluttered, for example: "the ocean is cerulean towards the horizon, vivid azure nearer shore, blue and sheened as peacock feathers" (*J* 238); "Clouds scudded across the pale thin brightening white moon, which laid a paving of platinum light on the ocean" (*J* 250), etc.

In her letters from the 1940s, Plath's perceptions of the ocean are, naturally, much more within what we would expect of a child – immediate perceptions – from the memory of an event that has just happened, for example in a letter to her grandparents whom she calls "Grammy and Grampy", from July 13, 1945, she just calls it "salty ocean" (*L* 1: 54). She also seems to be the only girl that dares to brave the big waves: "I was the only one who dared to go in first for the waves were strong and cold until you ducked" (*L* 1: 54). In a letter to her mother from July 25, 1946, aged 14, more adjectives are applied and the description is excellent for a girl at her age, containing not only the changing faces of the ocean, but also the activities practiced there, with lots of physical details: "When we arrived we sat down on the familiar white sand and had our nosebag lunches, and then made our barefoot way tediously over the barnacled rocks, until we at last reached the sandy golden strip where the low tide was. How I love the ocean! We then hunted for sea creatures in the shallow, warm pools between the rocks!" (*L* 1: 103). Plath's letters to her mother are considerably longer than those to her grandparents and usually relate a story, thus being excellent examples of narrative/ descriptive essays, for example:

[describing a bike ride, July 1, 1947] "We passed little country farms and gardens on the way, luxuriant with placid spotted cows and bright yellow daisies. The warm, sweet moist smell of the wayside grass was wafted to our nostrils as we rounded a bend and came smack against the blue curve of the ocean" (*L* 1: 119). In another letter to her mother from 5 July 1947, Plath pays more attention to detail, and we can notice a shift of the usual for her adjectives applied to the *waters*, adding brusque concreteness as well as the sensation of plentitude and pervasiveness: "The waters were a light, salty blue and a sandy, smooth bar stretched out into the ocean. The water was free from crabs and seaweed, and I went swimming with Sally Haven, an adorable girl who lives in Newton" (*L* 1: 125).

Sometimes the correspondent would be different which brings about some stylistic modifications. In a letter to Hans-Joachim Neupert, a pen-pal of hers dated 24 September 1948, she writes: "Truly, you seem to have a good understanding of English. Of course, idioms are difficult to master, but that will come to you in time. I know that when I attempt to write in French my phrasing is awkward, and I do not say what I mean always" (*L* 1: 163). The very young Plath then continues by talking about the significance of the ocean for her: "Somehow I have a special place in my heart for the ocean. I like the way the water changes from one mood to another – from high waves on dark, stormy days, to tranquil ripples on sunny days. I still remember a night that I spent on a lonely beach" (*L* 1: 163). What follows is yet another incident told near the ocean. What strikes one immediately is Plath's more careful use of English – she writes in short sentences, in active voice, unlike some of her letters to her mother – avoiding precise specialized words such as "waft", "barnacled", "duck", etc. Plath aged 16 was able to adapt her writing style with ease to someone whose English was not his mother tongue while also relating to the correspondent by admitting that her French also needed improvement.

The last letter to be examined from Plath's childhood period is one to Edward Cohen, dated: 11 August 1950. This is yet another long-distance correspondent and Plath is well aware of the feminine charm that she already exuded, added to her abruptly advanced writing skills, with the assistance of an accessory – her photograph. In this letter she lets herself go more with examples of irony and self-irony, for instance:

"Ah, yes, it's amazing what 1500 miles, a writing technique and long lashes can do" (*L* 1: 193). She continues, "Oh, I've known my share of intellectuals who were fascinating when it came to discussing evolution and destiny, but who didn't know the left foot from the right on a dance floor[30]… and then the big brawny lettermen who used one word to describe every conceivable situation" (*L* 1: 193). As the letter suggests, eighteen-year-old Sylvia would expect a man to be an accomplished gentleman – with decent general culture and dancing abilities. Plath then proceeds by describing her physical appearance:

> How about a few statistics not visible! I'm tall, tipping the yardstick at five feet eight; slender (this morning's breakfast of steak, fried potatoes and apple pie not adding an ounce); tan enough so that women tap my shoulder on the beach: "Podden [pardon] me, miss, but what suntan oil do you use?" None, lady, but forty-eight[31] hours in the blazing sun per week does wonders. I have light brown hair, on the blondish side in the summer, and dark brown eyes. Top this off by a mercurial disposition and there I am. A red-blooded American girl. (*L* 1: 194).

In the last letter, marking the end of childhood (from the age of 9 onwards it was rather unhappy due to her father's passing), we can already see a more mature womanly Plath, but still very playful, appearing a bit overconfident in herself, armed with her charm, wit, intellect, and good beach looks, poised to conquer the male and female world. Still, this is just appearances. It is enough to read the *Journals* and we will find passages, reflecting the same period (aged 18), where Plath speaks of her ever more present loneliness which she defines as *a disease of the blood*. There she says: "It comes from a vague core of the self" (*J* 29). She also writes: "God, but life is loneliness, despite all the opiates, despite the shrill tinsel gaiety of 'parties' with no purpose, despite the false grinning faces we all wear. And when at last you find someone to whom you feel you can pour out your soul, you stop in shock at the words you utter – they are so rusty, so ugly, so meaningless

[30] In the *Bell Jar*, among the many shortcomings she sees in herself, Esther (Plath) lists her inability to dance: "I was a terrible dancer. I couldn't carry a tune. I had no sense of balance, and when we had to walk down a narrow board with our hands out and a book on our heads in gym class, I always fell over" (79), which suggests that Plath required of men what she lacked in herself as a woman and was not willing to condone her requirements not being met. – a. n.

[31] Corrected from "forty eight" without the hyphen in the letter. – a. n.

and feeble" (*J* 31). The *Journals*, as it can be expected, are much more introvert and reveal a not so happy girl who is lonely: "but the loneliness of the soul in it's [its] appalling self-consciousness, is horrible and overpowering" (*J* 31). Judging by her declared religiosity, or rather lack thereof, Plath did not truly believe in the existence of the soul. Its usage here is routine talk and should denote a rather more elusive overextension of the self.

As seen in the analyzed passages from the *Journals* and the *Letters*, childhood is much more present in the *Letters*, in the *Journals* being occasionally evoked in the memory. Just like Sexton, Plath grew up near the ocean and it is very much present in all her writings concerning her childhood and adolescence. Before we get to the masterful portrayals of New York and the Atlantic from *The Bell Jar*, Plath's seascapes remain vivid, intelligent and a bit overambitious, which reflects her very young age for a writer. The texts have also demonstrated the acute awareness Plath had of the person she was talking to. The early feminine selves in her intimate *Journals* are often painfully insecure, but chillingly analytical; in her interactions with boys, she is revealed as an often unreluctant victim to boys' little liberties, with the clear perception that these students' affairs are rather short-lived. The last entry from the *Letters* is showing us not the philosophical vulnerable intelligent feminine self that we know from the *Journals*, but a pose, a girl with a mask casting bait for the fish to bite. The little girl is gone, the young woman has arrived.

The reproduced childhood in the compared texts shows Anne Sexton in a bigger control of her art and writing faculties, but that should come as no surprise – she was in her early 30s when her first poems were published while the examined texts by Sylvia Plath are from her teenage period.

2.3. Petya Dubarova and the sea – a childhood that ended too fast: the *Poems*

Petya Dubarova was born on 25 April 1962 and died on 4 December 1979. Not much is known about Dubarova's life because no poet's biography has appeared to date with almost all who knew the poet personally no longer among the living and no one to have asked the questions when friends, teachers and acquaintances could have

provided important answers. While in the Orwellian language people spoke and the constant fears they had during the times this might have been a fruitless and even risky endeavor, the thirty years of democracy have not changed the general interest much. Still, as a sign of recognition, a house-museum was opened in 1995 and a little statue was made in 2010 both in her native city Burgas. Dubarova's works did not resonate with the party ideology but rather expressed cravings for what was not available or could not be shown, therefore they contain the themes of secret, guilt, and death as a negation of that ideology, which was there to smother creativity, but in Dubarova's case only unleashed it. Despite the predominant dark colors of her late works, there is the exuberant rejoicement of life and light in her early writings, and in the later ones, whenever the latter break through the darkness, with an overall romantic perception of the world of nature. In the mythological reception of the poet and her work, based in no small part on the insufficient information for the reconstruction of a lifelike image of the person and the mysterious circumstances enshrouding her death, the readers are obliged to have an imagination commensurate to that of the remarkable poet. It was in 2018 that she entered for the first time the school syllabus in the 12th grade. In all actuality, however, the entry did not become part of the school manuals until 2021. It was 44 years after her death and after 32 years of democracy that the school students have read, for the very first time, arguably the best modern Bulgarian poet to date[32]. Dubarova's poetry contains about 200 pieces and almost every single one of them could be used for the purposes of this analysis. Since the poems will be discussed in translation, there will be things from the original that will be missing, as any translation, even the best one,

[32] As we say here, better late than never. Dubarova can be now compared to female poets such as Elisaveta Bagriana and Dora Gabe. She can also be a young poet's inspiration. Dubarova, just like G. Markov, is one of the very few writers that has emerged from the obscurantism enveloping writers that if placed on the school syllabus would, I believe, instantly produce a sensation of a different Bulgarian literature, much richer in ideas, technical execution, and pure beauty of the literary experience. I would call these the TLW – the temporarily lost writers, because I hope it is only temporary, although this has lasted for more than half a century already, and namely: G. P. Stamatov, G. Raychev, P. Vezhinov, V. Popov, H. Yasenov. Members of this elect club were also P. Dubarova and G. Markov, but very recently they have made it to the schools and have seen the light. – a. n.

cannot prevent it. They were written in Bulgarian to show the sheer joy of using the language in celebration of life and were not meant to be translated.

In "Somewhere there"[33] (Там някъде) written in 1977 from her acclaimed posthumous *The Sea and I* (Аз и морето) we find ourselves in the recognizable Burgas of the 1970s, also captured in the film reels of the epoch and today in the collective memory of those who were lucky enough to see it with their own eyes. It is rendered by the 15-year-old Petya in poetic colors with elements of nature representative of the city: "Somewhere there, in clouds, in maddening vines,/ From the eyelashes captured the taste of the brines/ From the sea-home of the salty crab/ From some enchanted old blue slab"| *Там някъде в облаци, в луди лози,/ от мигли запазили дъх на сълзи,/ от морския дом на соления рак,/ от някакъв стар, омагьосан син бряг*[34] (1: 13). It is obvious that the vines with their immediate access are more animated than the still life that follows, but every detail is important, and we have the presence of the sea everywhere – from the people's *eyelashes* to the *salty crab* and *blue slab*. The *maddening vines* could also be a poetic reproduction of the haze which occurs close to the sea, as well as their irresistible pull to the sea people of Burgas whose eyelashes all have retained the sea in them. The vines are the ones that send a wave-like effect of movement to all other elements in the picture. Immediately after that appears the lyrical 'I', having set the scene. The appearance of the sun, some two stanzas down, over the sea city changes all the surroundings and affects the speaker: "A sun with the magic of a golden fountain/ Erupts from the soft vault almost undone/ And some sort of a strange matte dawn/ Makes me happy, tender and fond"| *Слънце с магия на златен фонтан/ изригва от мекия свод разлюлян./ А*

[33] This translation of a poem by Petya Dubarova from Bulgarian into English, as well as the other translations of her works, in part or in entirety, is done with non-commercial purposes and pursues no financial gain, the only scope being rendering the content of the work in the most representative manner for its spirit and essence so that it can be analyzed in this study. – a. n.

[34] Only Dubarova's texts in poetry will be given in the original since their translation is undoubtedly the most challenging not only because it is in verse, but also because Bulgarian is the only language of the ones used from the sources which is not directly related to Latin. – a. n.

някаква матова странна зора/ ме прави щастлива и нежно добра (1: 13). The *sun* causes a complete change of the environment, obviously for the eyes that register the change of colors and transformation of nature. While some transformations are insignificant, others are violent – the *vault almost undone*. This awakening to life of the city makes the speaker smile and she is suddenly *fond* of the changed environment, the lines suggesting an overall feeling of goodness. This ever-present craving for the warm sun of Burgas, Southern Bulgaria, and the warm colors of the sea at summer make Dubarova a poet of the southern Bulgarian sea. By contrast, the Black Sea north of Sunny Beach is not always so welcoming even in summer.

Having revealed her transforming moment of the warm sea, Dubarova wishes to share her treasure with everyone who might read it at an unknown place or time: "I follow the light pace of the day/ And wish, oh, how I wish after I'm clay[35] [dead]/ Someone to be thrilled, miraculously saved/ Because in my verse he's found his fate"| *Аз следвам на времето светлия ход/ и искам, как искам след моя живот/ пак някой да трепне, внезапно спасен, открил в моя стих своя пристан зелен* (1: 14). In this ecstatic perception of nature Dubarova can be compared to Dickinson in most of her poems or Sexton in some of the lines from "You, Doctor Martin". By contrast, Sexton cannot keep a happy mood to the end of a poem to reflect a more cheerful disposition unlike Dickinson. The lyrical 'I' in this poem of Dubarova's is overly generous and wants to give the gift of the good mood to everyone, having captured the magic of summer Burgas. Dickinson usually presents a solitary observer who remains in blissful solitude inebriated with godly nature – "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed". By contrast, Plath is not so romantic as Dubarova, and not bubblingly ecstatic about changing nature, either, possibly due to the different effect of the Atlantic by comparison to that of the warm southern sea. She likes to observe and describe but is usually not very involved in the description. As it has been demonstrated, she likes to transgress spaces in nature on her own, when no one is expecting it,

[35] I have chosen to render the exact rhyme and possibly rhythm, keeping the original rhyme pattern, at all cost, that is with a slight or bigger change of meaning which receives compensation elsewhere in the poem, thus aiming for the preservation of the overall effect of the built image. – a. n.

breaking on through to the other side. In this gem of a poem, Dubarova, aged 15, has the child's desire of unconditional sharing absent in Plath at 16 for example – the letter to the pen pal where she comments on what she is offering and retaining and where her irony is already palpable – it was to become biting in the later poems.

In "Murder" (Убийство) dated in 1975, aged only 13, Dubarova constructs one of her most memorable poems with a strong ecological theme – the pollution of her beloved sea which, just like in all her poems, is personified into some sort of a good-natured superhuman being, a leviathan that stoically bears human abuse but who is finally defeated in his magnanimous super-humanness, deprived of the capacity to create, and give joy. The man-made element – the harbor is also personified into some evil cynic through the act of spitting crude oil. As with other poems by Dubarova, here we can also see the three stages of an event – the spilling of the oil, the immediate reaction of the wounded sea and the disappointed people who fail to understand, and finally, a grim prediction of the death of the sea brought on by continuous misunderstanding and criminal neglect on part of the people: "A harbor spat crude oil/ Insolently creased his eyes and sneered/ A cold shiver ran through the sea,/ He coughed, strung gray veins, reared"| *Едно пристанище изплю мазут./ Нахално сви очи и се захили./ Премина през морето тръпка студ, закашля то, изопна сиви жили* (1: 72). In this chronological cause-and-effect narrative sequence, Dubarova is undoubtedly influenced by the Bulgarian tradition, her reliving the event is very emotional, the sea and the harbor personified into good and evil humanoids, respectively. As both Plath's and Sexton's texts testify, the American poets did not need to resort to such poetical disguise, directly condemning the perceived culprits for human atrocities, which speaks volumes about the differences in the freedom of speech in the two military camps.

The second stanza typically shows a member (offspring) that has become a casualty of the act: "A wave – beautiful and good,/ Poisoned lay beside the quay/ And sad seagulls with seagull plumes/ Adorned her grave, see"| *Една вълна – красива и добра,/ отровена полегна върху кея/ и тъжни чайки с чайкови пера/ закичиха и гроба ѝ/ и нея* (1: 72). The sea reacts as a human would over the death of his/ her child: "The sea did not sleep until dawn/ His child sadly to bemoan…/ In his

heart he closed the sorrow/ And wistful waited for the morrow"| *Морето не заспа до сутринта./ За мъртвата си рожба дълго плака…/ Затвори във сърцето си скръбта/ и утрото замислено дочака* (1: 72). Dubarova keeps narrating the consequences of the oil spill eventually presenting the people who refuse to understand: "But he was silent in a light so gray/ His wound smarting bitter/ The beautiful, perished wave/ Kept spilling her poisoned litter…"| *Но то мълчеше в сива светлина/ и пареше му раната горчива –/ красивата загинала вълна./ Отровата не спря да се разлива…* (1: 72). The direct victims of the ecological disaster – dying fish, dolphins and seaweed also come into view with some naturalism arising from the vivid economical depiction the graphical concreteness of which is as much as hinted at, but as with so many of Dubarova's works, it can easily be finalized through the readers' imagination (1: 72). The poem finishes upon a postapocalyptic vision prophetically evoking a nuclear disaster (Chernobyl) or a nuclear arms exchange, which was always in the air during the Cold War, with an equally devastating effect on the sea: "And someday a freezing scowling cold/ Will envelop the harbor, oh so gray/ Under black foam as if under a mold/ At his feet the sea will die away"| *И някой ден навъсен, студ суров/ пристанището сиво ще облъхне, под черна пяна като под покров/ в нозете му морето ще издъхне* (1: 72). Plath's highly evocative metaphor of the *bell jar* finds its place in Dubarova's poem through portraying similar masks of uncaring people and indifferent institutions; the latter in Dubarova are completely absent for understandable reasons, crystalizing, like in Plath's novel, into the *mold* enveloping, covering all, effectively stifling life.

At this tender age Dubarova easily compares to the early Plath in the themes of her poems and the depth with which she treats them, creating an environment uncannily free of adults. While they are visibly and palpably there in Plath's early poem "Bitter Strawberries", in Dubarova their presence is usually reduced to the classroom where they stand in hierarchical opposition to the children. Still, even there, their presence is not physical, as they are in Plath or as they appear in Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1982). In that Dubarova created a children's poetry that firmly established children as the legitimate writing subjects of represented childhood, indirectly affirming Jacqueline Rose's

contention as a key moment in reading children's literature, and namely that "children's literature is necessarily an adult fantasy of how they would wish childhood to be, artfully designed to seduce children into compliance" (Grenby 51). In Dubarova's texts the children do not need a Neverland as they would in J. Barrie's *Peter Pan* or K. Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* – that is, a totally different imaginary location where they can be themselves, perhaps presupposing the author's intentionality to have them confined to a magical but secluded place away from parental control as something that children would appreciate. Her trusted friend was the warm southern sea whose soothing caress was always there for her, reliving its transformations through her poetry for all of us to experience. Dubarova is the one who seems to have needed the sea the most out of the three since, having it to herself, it becomes her entire poetical world against which she can create her poetic selves and with whom she can identify.

Dubarova's poetry goes through a transformation from 1977 onwards, becoming increasingly transcendental. The sea gradually recedes, the topics of secrets, lies, guilt, ingratitude become central, the school is omnipresent as an insupportable oppressive institution, the school uniform – hateful because of its insistence on monochrome colors in a contrast with the poet's "multicolor girl's heart". The bodily perceptions, the ecstasy and hedonistic delight of contemplating the changing cityscape with the beloved sea nearby no longer work and are ousted by an impostor – the preoccupation with the spiritual at the expense of the carnal. Religion also slowly creeps in but rather as a question to which Dubarova's answer is that after death we live on in our children, thus taking a position very close to that of Plath – the nonexistence of God as we know Him from the Bible. Death also becomes a recurrent motif as well as what we leave behind. It would be difficult to judge by the nature of the poems though since teenagers are especially vulnerable at this age, they feel they know more than they need, yet at the first seemingly insurmountable obstacle they may buckle and with the lack of support it is not easy, especially if the parents are unaware of the problems. One thing emerges in Petya's last poetic pieces though – the *secret* as the secret of life and death, of the impossibility to express life through poetry.

The last poem I shall discuss then will be her "Secret" (Тайна) dated 10 January 1979.

A cloud grayish like a mousehole
Shelters quietly my look
A broken shell my hand rolls
Snow-white air in verse to book
In the pupils, in the cups of my eye
Splashes something foreign, strange
And birds in sorrow, like me, fie!
Pierce me with the angle of their range
But my verse not weathered winter
Will put its summer on my back
And I – into verse will splinter
Unheard, unsung, unsad
Then I will sneak into a play
In one of the acts, radiant
I will be authorless and gay
But a little secret, unsalient

И облак сивкав като миша дупка
пак погледа ми приютява тихо,
от мойта длан – разчупена черупка
– изтича въздух снежнобял и стихов.
Във чашите на моите зеници
се плисва нещо чуждо, непознато
и сиви, като мене тъжни птици,
пробождат ме с върха на свойто ято. Но моят стих, от зима неизпръхнал, ще метне на гърба ми свойто лято
и аз тихотворение ще стана,
от никого нечуто, неизпято.
Тогава ще се вмъкна във пиеса
на някоя от сцените, сияйна,
ще бъда най-безавторна, щастлива,
ще бъда просто малка тайна (1: 130).

This poem shows clearly what was left from the sea for the young poet – *a broken shell* which undoubtedly symbolizes the ultimate untenability of the sea as a life-saving image. The poem may be seen as an expression of the poet's dissatisfaction with the writing process that sifts through the broken shell in empty air which is *snow-white* reflecting the color of the paper on which the verses are laid. The poet will have to think of the meaning of what she is trying to express – *putting the poem's summer on the poet's back*. Old images seem to have worn off in their power to create the sense of new old worlds. Forced to think of the meaning of the *unheard* and *unsung* verse which is also *unsad*, that is, not very important, fickle, the speaker will finally turn into her own verse, will be stripped of materiality and the never-ending play between the poet and her verse which traverses Dubarova's poetry will be finally over – the two becoming one. Having entered her own verse, the poet will be forever hidden to everyone else but through the persistence of the voice itself on the stage in someone else's play her utterance will be repeated time and time again, continually acquiring

clear and different meanings because they will be put in a context. Thus, the words of the poet's verse will mean things to the spectators and the readers while the *little secret unsalient*, that is, insignificant and open to interpretation, will be that the words were originally conceived by a poet named Petya Dubarova. Of course, there may be other interpretations, and this is one of the rare vague poems by the poet, but this vagueness does reflect a certain loss of meaning in life. It seems the poet is offering herself in the form of words because only this will remain after death and people will be able to dispose of them as they please, with their author unknown. Like Keats with his famous epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water", Dubarova does not seem to have envisioned a strong interest in her works. Like Plath's *Ariel*, her collection *The Sea and I* was a breakthrough winning the first prize for poetry at the Southern Spring (Южна Пролет) festival after she was no longer around, not before having been rejected by the publishing houses on the grounds of her being too young, not being a member of the Union of Writers, and last but not least, her suicide which did not speak well of a state in which everyone was supposed to be happy. But her suicide in the 1970s was not such an unheard-of event. Several Bulgarian poets found life not worth living in the 20th century: Dimitar Boyadjiev (1911), Peyo Yavorov (1914), Penyo Penev (1959), Hristo Bankovsky (1976), Andrei Germanov (1981), Veselin Andreev (1991) – out of the seven with Dubarova more than half took their own lives during the communist times and out of those five only Dubarova has been included in the school program quite recently, but not as a canonical Bulgarian writer, which means that she could also be removed now at any moment. Despite the many poems Dubarova wrote (over 200), the sea will remain her main subject. She felt confident in it and, as this analysis has shown, could approach it from any angle, always rendering fresh poems, stunning in their exuberant feeling, poetic depth, and technical mastery.

The analyzed three female poets have shown the importance of growing up by the sea. Since Sexton started writing her first major poems when she was well past childhood, even though her poems revisit her early years, they are the work of a person who had the technique of an adult, if not conscious of the responsibilities in life that come with that. Plath was closer in age to Dubarova when she created

her poems from *Juvenilia*, but they are not precisely dated. At any rate, she must have been at least 17 or 18 years of age, judging by Hughes's note, and still may have written from memory. The sea from her childhood is more present in her letters and *Johnny Panic* prose. The poems by Dubarova are the freshest take on living and growing up by the sea as they evolved from the sunny summer girl, smiling, and laughing. Unfortunately, she became the serious school student who from her photographs does impart the look of a prisoner in a school uniform who would share that her hell is the high school – the English Language School of Burgas, with its relentless intransigence and rigid discipline. Dubarova's poems are then unique because they not only recreate childhood in the 1970s Comecon Bulgaria, but they are children's literature written by a child which can also be enjoyed by adults.

3. Through the Rabbit Hole – the power of transformation: Sexton's political stance; Plath's *Juvenilia* and *Johnny Panic* vs Dubarova's prose

Appreciation of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* connects Plath and Sexton yet again and some of the books' ideas, ironically, can be found both in their real lives and in fiction. One of the most important ones is the transformation that Alice goes through on different occasions in the book, first unknowingly, but then as experimentation with herself in relation to the others and to the self that she knew from when she was normal size. Carroll's book takes children's imagination to another level where the effect can be obtained almost instantaneously, unlike Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* where the gullible traveler has to leave a land – that of the Lilliputians to go to that of the Giants and finally to the Yahoos and Houyhnhnms. And it is so because he does not change his size or shape but arrives at places where time and again, he is convinced that these do matter, and he finds himself "changing" his height or mentality in relation to humanoids that look like him and with whom he believes he can communicate.

In *Alice in Wonderland* Alice dreams about descending into a fantastic world where she is challenged repeatedly to change her size with a bitter ironic effect which makes her, more often than not, look grotesque – starting with her becoming very small and swimming in her

own tears, moving to becoming very big, cramped in a house which she fills to the point of getting immobilized, to the final revelation that with an elongated neck, crawling and loving eggs, she must be a serpent, learned from the mouth/ bill of a pigeon (Carroll 49). Returning to her normal size self does not help, either, since Alice continues to deal with bizarre creatures – animals and humans alike who appear to be equally obsessed with themselves and their own unconditional craziness, leading, just like Swift's fourth part of *Gulliver's Travels*, to a complete communication breakdown. Unlike *Gulliver*, the *Allice* books were written for children, but the reception of the books has included leaving certain readers horrified by the seemingly intermittent shapeshifting (not only Alice's), nonsensical talk, grim relentless practicality, and senseless violence on part of just about everyone, Alice not completely excluded. This effect of the books is arguably surpassed only in the unfortunate 3rd Season of *Twin Peaks* (2017), which probably can be summed up best as: a gratuitous exercise in shock and awe.

3.1. Sexton and her *Transformations* – the perspective of 2021

The ambivalent connection to Carroll's books seems to have extended to members of the Sexton's family as well – Linda Sexton, who, in her sophomore year at school, talks about writing a poem called "The Rabbit Hole" that "described the numb depression I [she] felt" (132). Sexton seems to have exercised a true Peter Pan effect on her daughter since the daughter's psychiatrist discouraged Linda from being dependent on her mother as that would prevent her "from growing up" (133). Representations of size fluctuation as an identification with a major transformative theme from *Alice in Wonderland* can be observed in both Plath and Sexton. For example, in the already analyzed poem by Sexton, "You, Doctor Martin", we have the transformation of adults into "large children" (4), having stepped into a nightmarish world not unlike that of Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*. The same idea in Lowell's "Waking in the Blue" was shown to have the hospital inmates transmogrified into whales (82). The observation made by both Lowell and Sexton reveals the "mentally ill" as officially deprived of adult intelligence, no longer in control of their faculties or actions with their bodies disproportionately grown. But it was not only in her poetry that body size changed, and it is not about the predictable enlargement of

the female body brought about by pregnancy. Linda Sexton comments on her mother's transformation after a fall she took: "She put on thirty pounds, becoming flabby through the stomach, face, and hips, ballooning to a size eighteen. Once up and around again, she didn't lose the weight: Thorazine, it seemed, had another side effect – weight gain" (136). The transformations of the person taking this standard drug for treating schizophrenia are also reflected in the Smashing Pumpkins song – "Pale Horse" which present humans turned into vegetables, rendering Billy Corgan's fictionalized memories of his mother fighting a mental illness: "There'll be no others,/ There'll be no long lost friends/ Empty on the insides/ Empty of a last pretense." The song ends with the refrain: "Please come back/ Please come back/ Please come back, Pale Horse", suggesting yet another mystical or mythical transformation of the mother without the effect of the drug, which is to be preferred to her vegetative state once the drug has been taken. As Linda Sexton suggests, the fall was self-induced as a therapy for a broken heart, her mother having been jilted by a lover. With Sexton in life, this transformation was a metaphor: "Mother had let herself 'go' – originally down the stairs, and afterwards by letting her physical appearance deteriorate – because *Duhl* had let her go" (137), thus no longer desiring to be associated with the image of a "princess", Duhl being her new therapist. Her final transformation seems to have been an identification with Doctor Martin's end of the working day from the eponymous poem, yet another confirmation of her inability to mature – "Anne was her mental illness. Only once in a while did I see a glimmer of her shine through the demands of this noisy child dressed in adult's clothing. The woman I had loved was already gone" (L. Sexton 186). Sexton's final transformation in poetry was through her poem collection *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975) published, just like *Ariel*, posthumously. In "Rowing" Sexton describes the stages of (in)human confinement to which the speaker feels subjected in life, and which lead to perceived insanity by the others, realized in a definite in-life departure from everything earthly and worldly, except the wonderful "evening dinner" and the difficult (awful) appropriation to the unfathomable habitation of God: "the crib with its glacial bars" superseded by "the dolls/ and the devotion to their plastic mouths" (417). In yet another projection to Varley's "The Persistence of Vision"

we have the lyrical 'I's perception of life as "cruel houses where people seldom touch/ though touch is all" (417). As the speaker goes through life, the natural elements become obnoxious too, possibly a reference to exploding atomic bombs: "and then there were many strange apparitions,/ the nagging rain, the sun turning into poison" (417). God will finally embrace her with his hands as "the gnawing pestilential rat" (417) into which the speaker has turned, passing through the different stages of life.

The most memorable transformation of the adult Plath in fiction, as remarkable as Sexton's *Awful Rower*, is her *Lady Lazarus*[36]. Qualified by Al Alvarez "an angry poem" (*Sylvia Plath*), equally admired and detracted, similarly to Sexton's poem, it showcases Plath at her technical and most transgressive best before the 1963 poems. Unlike Sexton's account of a passed life, it is an account of Plath's suicide attempts and the effect they have both on the lyrical 'I' and the others. So Plath asks: "My face a featureless fine,/ Jew linen/ Peel off the napkin/ O my enemy/ Do I terrify?" (*CP* 244). The enemy is the same one as in Sexton's "You, Doctor Martin" – the "Herr Doktor"[37], looking at the revived woman with a Frankenstein-like mixture of amazement and dismay. Defiant as ever, she registers the effects of the electrical charges to her body, each one unlocking a faculty of hers for which she must pay. Not rowing towards God, but facing her eternal enemy – the doctor identified with "Herr Lucifer" (*CP* 246), the lyrical speaker sets the definition, but also limitations of her resurrection: "Beware/ Beware./ Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air" (*CP* 247). Recalling Bloom's declared inability to

[36] In *The Bell Jar*, Plath provides metacriticism as regards "Lady Lazarus". Its seeming narcissism for which she has been reproached repeatedly is based on the perceived need for some sort of a certificate, a certain endorsement of the fact that a person has been reborn, just like one is entitled to such rituals and documents upon one's birth. Ironically, a person does not ask for these when he or she is born. When one expects them for having been brought back to the world of the living, despite his earnest desire, one is denied these claims: "But I wasn't getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice – patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (257). – a. n.

[37] In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood (Plath) is willing to admit that "doctors and writers could get along fine" (58). But this proves to be ironic because Esther is later on repeatedly betrayed by doctors that torture her with electroshocks. – a. n.

"describe a power of transformation" (4), at this stage of the study I am offering the following description: the speaker has turned from a woman in her 30s into a frightening angry goddess who is consuming men, leaving a blazing trail of men reduced to nonentities. While with Sexton we have the humble misfit readying herself for the terrifying and welcoming at the same time meeting with God, with Plath it is a goddess on the war path of destruction, the *human* woman already dead. What can be perceived as common between the two final transformations is the departure from everything human (save for the dinner ritual in Sexton) – with Sexton, because of her feeling rejected by humanity (their contempt for her craving the touch), with Plath, because of her rejecting humanity (her contempt for the others' hypocrisy – pretending that they care about the touch), both poets seeing humanity as not humane enough. In both poems there is the recognition of the fact that the two speakers have had enough, and that they are not going to fight windmills anymore.

In *The Matrix* (1999) Neo is offered two pills by the rebel leader, Morpheus – a red and a blue one with the enigmatic warning: "You take the blue pill...the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill...you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." This could serve as a fair description of what would happen if a child could choose between the original Grimm's fairy tales and Sexton's reading of them. The first thing that Sexton does is present the storyteller who is introduced thus: "The speaker in this case/ is a middle-aged witch, me" (223), so we have everything from the perspective of a witch who is potentially going through a witchy middle-age crisis and the resulting transformations are a result of that. In "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" the speaker addresses the issue of the oriental appreciation that Snow White commands in the Western world which unifies Western and Eastern reception as being identical, thus insisting that both men and women from these two worlds subscribe to stereotyped patriarchalism: "No matter what life you lead/ the virgin is a lovely number" (224), which idolizes virgins. Sexton's Snow White, and Grimm's for that matter, is no intellectual, unlike Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (*La Belle et la Bête*) "cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,/ arms and legs made of Limoges/ lips like Vin du Rhône,/ rolling her

china-blue doll eyes/ open and shut" (224), thus ridiculing the original wishful creation of the girl by the mother who pricks her finger with a needle and drops of blood fall on the white snow. Furthermore, Sexton suggests that this symbolic purity is just an illusion – Snow White acts like a good girl during the day, but when everyone is asleep, including herself, she has wild sexual fantasies welcoming a Freudian interpretation: "shut for the thrust/ of the unicorn" (224). Fantasizing leaves her visibly untarnished and pure for the world: "white as a bonefish", the simile strongly implying that she is dead in her artificiality and false pretenses even though everyone, including herself, is unaware of that. Snow White is also given her age – 13, which criticizes not only America's perceived worship of virgins, but also their ever-attenuating age significance in the epoch, being in her very early teens, also testified by Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). As such, the virgin is seen as precious commodity, but at the same time, already somewhat arcane. The evil stepmother in Sexton is the same despotic figure as in Grimm's tales since she condemns Snow White to death by hacking with an axe, expressing the desire to eat the virgin's heart, a possible reincarnation of the blood-thirsty Elizabeth Bathory who believed in bathing in virgins' blood as a method for remaining continually rejuvenated. Sexton, however, suggests that in the stepmother lives any other woman, only here her unspoken desires are externalized for everyone to see and that women are fiercely competitive with one another, an idea present in the original text as well. Out in the world and away from the stepmother, Snow White provokes sexual fantasies in all animals: "and at each stood a hungry wolf,/ his tongue lolling out like a worm./ The birds called out lewdly […]/ and the snakes hung down in hoops/ each a noose for her sweet white neck" (226). Something else that needs to be discussed is Sexton's accent on the *white* color. There can be multiple interpretations here: the animals themselves, for instance, could be members of other races, some of them admiring her, others wishing to eliminate her as a weird mythological creature, like the lascivious unicorn from her dreams. Once in the dwarfs' house, and not needing to play to any decorum, Snow White reveals herself as not so different from her stepmother: "Snow White ate seven chicken livers" (226), thus implying Snow White's ravenous nature, being wonderfully unaware of

the original tale's conventions – that she should always be a paragon young lady, rendering herself attractive for the male gaze and patriarchal appetites[38].

When the stepmother in disguise reaches the presumed haven for the runaway stepdaughter – the dwarfs' abode, she fastens the *lacing* very tightly around Snow White's *bodice* in a covert desire to stifle her stepdaughter's burgeoning femininity, the second attempt on her life is through a *poisoned comb* (*a curved scorpion*, a little detail by Sexton) – an attack on a prominent feminine attribute. The *poisoned apple* – the enlightened/ gluttonous woman, if knowledge can be poison, finally does the trick (the three attempts identical with the original). The rest of the story follows the original almost exactly, but we have a nicely knitted concluding loop: "Meanwhile Snow White held court,/ rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut/ and sometimes referring to her mirror/ as women do" (229).

In this story, presented in verse and through the mouth of the *middle-aged witch*, the *speaker*, Sexton accentuates the profound universality of the tale, making small but significant changes to the original. As Plath said in her *Journals*, "we're not always right and pure" (*J* 47), referring to America as the *white America* that dropped the bombs in Japan and that with its internal and foreign policies left both the USA and the world divided. With Sexton's transformation of Snow White, we have not the dazzling white maiden who is naïve and good-natured, but a regular white American girl who provokes both envy and admiration in the others, and who, upon a closer look, will be unveiled as unimpressive, with imperfections that will start appearing on her face, like on her stepmother's. She lacks intellect and, not having a good nature as an excuse for naiveté, she may be said to be devoid of intelligence as well, falling for the same traps as the original girl from Grimm's tale fell, but here, not being naïve (the unicorn dream), she is guilty of exaggerated women's vanity – the lacing and the comb, stupidity – not recognizing the scorpion curved into a comb, racism – not paying any special attention to the dwarfs despite the unicorn dream – she could accept a relationship with an unknown *other*, but only as a

[38] See Boev, Hristo. *Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos: Similarities, Differences, Continuities* (174 -189). – a. n.

fantasy, and gluttony – not knowledge, earning Sexton's/ the speaker's comment "dumb bunny" (228). Since she does not take just a little from the dwarfs' soup, as any 19th century girl in a marrying age would have done – (Dickens's angelic daughters are excellent examples). This Snow White is a 1950s/1960s American girl and not having anyone to control her, in the dwarfs' house, she *eats 7 chicken livers*. Apart from the surfeit of the stomach's exertion, we should ask ourselves the question if they were cooked at all – no information in Sexton's poem about that. Despite numerous parodical variations of the tale where Snow White engages in some group orgies with the seven dwarfs, Sexton stays true to the original, but also to her portrayal of American girls of the times where whites would prefer love partners from the same race, the same could be said about color people with the well-known notable exceptions. Finally, Sexton's Snow White follows in her stepmother's footsteps and from the final lines we have reasons to believe that she will be as despotic and vain as her stepmother has been.

Sexton attains new levels of satirical brilliance in "Rumpelstiltskin" where the evil imp is presented to the reader in the following manner, identifying with President Truman from the beginning of the 1950s: "Inside many of us/ is a small old man/ who wants to get out./ No bigger than a two-year-old/ whom you'd call lamb chop/ yet this one is old and deformed./ His head is okay/ but the rest of him wasn't Sanforized./ He is a monster of despair./ He is all decay./ He speaks up as tiny as an earphone/ with Truman's asexual voice:/ I am your dwarf/ I am the enemy within./ I am the boss of your dreams" (233). Sexton's sharp satirical version underscores what has come to be known as the "Rumpelstiltskin Principle" which states: "the value and power of using personal names and titles is well established in psychology, management, teaching and trial law." The imp is conjured up out of the need for desperate actions when the girl in the fairy tale is challenged to prove in an isolated environment – a room where she is locked with a spinning wheel – that she can turn straw into gold. Sexton continues with the ventriloquistic presentation of Truman: "No. I am not the law in your mind, the grandfather of watchfulness./ I am the law of your members,/ the kindred of blackness and impulse./ See. Your hand shakes./ It is not palsy or booze./ It is your doppelgänger/ trying to get out./ Beware… Beware…" (233). This intrusive figure stunted

into the shape of a dwarf lives within many Americans which makes the people a nation possessed with the Truman evil spirit, strongly suggesting that the politicians that get to govern, regardless of how hateful they become to their own people, inevitably resonate with most of them. The miller's daughter is yet another American girl: "Poor grape with no one to pick./ Luscious and round and slick./ Poor thing./ To die and never see Brooklyn" (233-4). The Truman-like dwarf is given additional traits of ugliness: "The door opened and in popped a dwarf./ He was as ugly as a wart" (234). Sexton takes her time to unveil many other unpleasant aspects to the president-imp in his Canterbury tale-like prologue, containing blunt self-disclosure, no doubt a vitriolic critique of Truman's authorizing the use of the atomic bomb and praising it as "a lives saver on both sides", as well as the intervention in the Korea War in 1950, and his rather authoritarian rough handling of the Railway Strike of the same year. To top it off, Truman was justly accused of cronyism and in Sexton's story he is a rather garrulous little man seeking attention and complaining about the fact that he is childless: "I am a dwarf./ I have been exhibited on Bond Street/ and no child will ever call me Papa./ I have no private life. […] I am your evil eye/ and no child will ever call me Papa" (234). Truman had had a child by then but because of his rather short stature, he was not the representative American daddy of the 1950s.

Just like Chaucer's lively interactions among the pilgrims, the dwarf is upstaged by the American *damsel in distress*: "Stop this Papa foolishness,/ she cried. Can you perhaps/ spin straw into gold?" (234). The tale follows its original course and when the girl gives birth to a baby, the dwarf appears to claim it: "I have become a papa!/ Cried the little man" (235). Although she is ready to part with everything else, the dwarf is adamant. Sexton is again quite ironical of the girl, now queen: "The queen cried two pails of sea water./ She was as persistent/ as a Jehovah's Witness" (235) until the dwarf relents and offers the guessing game, some of the names offered being again pejorative for the dwarf: "Spindleshanks? Spiderlegs?" (236). After guessing the name, the ending is way more brutal and sinister than the original story: "He stamped his right foot into the ground/ and sank in up to his waist./ Then he tore himself in two./ Somewhat like a split broiler./ He laid his two

sides down on the floor,/ one part soft as a woman,/ one part a barbed hook,/ one part papa,/ one part Doppelgänger" (236).

Again, as with Snow White, Sexton does not deem it appropriate to make many changes to the original, preserving the plot and its wide folkloric appeal. However, by focusing on the dwarf with the key story elements in place, she allows the portrait of the president to emerge as a brilliant caricature which borrows complementary information from his actual presidency and appearance while the poem is being read. This open attack on the former American president appears strikingly bold and one may wonder how the poem was even published in 1971, considering the reformulation that Robin Morgan had to make to be able to publish her accusation against Ted Hughes after 1972, but perhaps an important British poet in the prime of his life, well known in the USA by that time also thanks to his suicidal wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, was worthy more than a former president aged 87 with only one year left to live. The president's being psychologically and physically reduced to an evil dwarf in Sexton's poem mirrors Truman's perceived public image and also calls into question his tenability as a viable candidate: he became known for his gambling, bourbon swilling and profane talking which occasionally resurfaced to the press – these were, of course, simply not known to the wide public before he became president but one carries one's habits with oneself regardless of the societal ascent or descent one takes. The vivisection Sexton makes of the self-destruct dwarf in the end literally and figuratively delivers the *coup de grâce* to the president, but also to all the Americans who elected a zoomorphic alien creature whose most human part is that of a "woman", the rest of the four parts are indeed the constituents of fast-decaying bodies, containers of an unnamable evil as in the 3rd Season of *Twin Peaks* or of *Alien*.

The American girl who becomes mother in this poem is no different from Snow White, she has the same personality as the porcelain beauty, but we are to imagine that she must be a countryside girl, being a miller's daughter (as in the original), she is plump as a *grape* and by marrying into wealth may not even manage to see the city of Brooklyn, remaining confined to a big family mansion – the palace of the king – which suggests that she is as good as dead to city culture. The birth of the child and the child's ugliness which she fails to

recognize ("ugly as an artichoke/ but the queen thought him a pearl" (235)) further attests to her lack of intelligence. She is in all aspects ordinary and probably white. With this marriage of mediocrity to wealth, Sexton instills the idea that the highest chances for continuation into the next generations stand girls of average intellectual capacities and their propagation through securing alliances with the well-off condemns the nation to regressing mediocrity which is the United States' future as opposed to the neutral tone of the original tale where there is no comment on the girl's intelligence and her marrying the king and bearing him a child is a reflection of the collective consciousness of the people to establish a relationship between the ruler of the land and his subjects, thus producing an heir (the baby) who will be half noble, half peasant.

I finish my discussion of Sexton's *Transformations* with her "Rapunzel". In this poem Sexton has yet another bold take on a sensitive issue: relationship between women. Sexton had many men and women friends in life and despite her daughter's alleged misdemeanors on part of the mother and Sexton's liberated self, the poet remained openly heterosexual. Her treatment of the popular fairy tale by Grimm, however, certainly raises questions. With LGBT and feminism on the rise in the 1970s, the grounds were prepared for the 1980s more prominent feminist manifestations, one of which was an essay by Adrienne Rich. Her "Compulsory Homosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) opens with a statement that its author proceeds to challenge, and namely that: "Biologically men have only one innate orientation – a sexual one that draws them to women, – while women have two innate orientations, sexual toward men and reproductive toward their young" (130). That naturally places women in the position of progenitors and guarantees a caring instinct for their offspring. Are there any limits to that care, though? Could that presuppose an intimate relationship between a mother and her son or daughter? Naturally, if this were to happen, it would be a crime in today's Western world, and it *was* a crime in Sexton's epoch as well. What if the women were unrelated or their blood relation was not of the first order? The case in question is of a middle-aged woman and a small girl. Both the original and Sexton's version provide answers to this question, but these answers differ.

The LGBT movement as we know it has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s, 1950s America being overwhelmingly heterosexual, with few important activists such as Dale Jennings, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) organization, and Frank Kameny. For practicing their gay sexuality, they suffered persecutions, trials, and firings from work, which brought about Second-wave feminism. In her influential essay Rich addresses issues that she is convinced have existed since time immemorial – that is since patriarchy has ruled the world. Rich insists that lesbian experience is no "mere 'sexual preference" (131) and lists important points according to which she sees male socio-politico-economic dominance over women as restrictive of women's free sexual choices (132), thus arguing for heterosexuality as being imposed on women by men and that women not only are expected to comply with it but are rather forced to accept it as their only "natural" choice. On this premise, we can say that Sexton, far from being gay, anticipates Rich's essay in the ironic but also favorable light in which she views the archetypal relationship between Rapunzel and the witch.

In the fairy tale Rapunzel has been given to the witch to take care of her and she believes the witch to be her mother. At the age of 12, the witch locks her up in a tall tower so she cannot escape. The witch asks Rapunzel to let down her hair so the older woman can climb every time she wants to visit her. The very act of incarceration in the story determines what can be seen as *compulsory lesbianism* at the most or overzealous protection from premarital relationships at the least, since Rapunzel is thus denied the possibility of making a free choice as far as her sexual orientation goes and the original story does not specify until when and with what purpose the witch locked her in the tower – except keep her for herself as long as possible. Both versions affirm the girl's *innate heterosexuality* and eventually the girl manages to escape, have children, and reunite with the children's father, both Rapunzel and the prince having to pay a dear price for their heterosexual love. It is worth paying close attention to a few elements in Sexton's version and compare the girl that emerges from it to the girls we have already met in the previous two poems.

Identifying with the witch – the opening to the *Transformations*, Sexton begins in the following striking manner: "A woman/ who loves a woman/ is forever young./ The mentor/ and the student/ feed off each

other./ Many a girl/ had an old aunt/ who locked her in the study/ to keep the boys away./ They would play rummy/ or lie on the couch/ and touch and touch/ Old breast against young breast…" (244-5). It seems Linda Sexton was telling the truth – about her mother touching her inappropriately. But, if we forget about that for a moment and consider this passage in the larger context in which it is put, Sexton talks about the many natural situations in which aunts, being the closest females who are not mothers to the girl, find themselves spending time with their niece not infrequently playing games. Some of these games may go just a little wrong. However, we have the whole story clearly from the witch's perspective, so she continues: "Let your dress fall down your shoulder, come touch a copy of you/ for I am at the mercy of rain,/ for I have left the three Christs of Ypsilanti,/ for I have left the long naps of Ann Arbor/ and the church spires have turned to stumps./ The sea bangs into my cloister/ for the young politicians are dying, are dying so hold me, my young dear, hold me…" (245).

The middle-aged woman breaks into a rant in which she speaks about her self-denial, referring to a psychiatric case study by Milton Rokeach, which must have been fascinating for Sexton, referencing a city in the state of Michigan, and then she invokes the sea which is besieging them – in their *cloister* for all of these have become some immaterial white noise and the young girl, being with her, is protected by the witch, safe from getting lost. In this free association of images, there come *the young politicians* who *are dying*, which is repeated with an emphasis, undoubtedly a reference to the assassinations of JFK (d. 1963) aged 46 and his brother RFK (d. 1968) aged 42. So, if the fine young promising men of America are slain, who in this world can the girl really trust? In the next stanza the witch continues painting surrealist landscapes while still asking the girl to hold her ever more closely: "The yellow rose will turn to cinder/ and the New York City will fall in/ before we are done so hold me,/ my young dear, hold me" (245).

Asking the girl to come nearer and nearer while mumbling incantations which mix some witch mythology and actual reality, the witch is aiming for a kiss – of *the nether lips* of the girl, thus implying that the girl is also an archetype that can potentially be turned into a lesbian nymphette, an inverted "Lolita" who will be corrupted by the

aunt if only she has not been corrupted beforehand. The images change fast and one turbulent scene is replaced by another, so the witch goes on: "and I will give you angel fire in return/ We are two clouds/ glistening in the bottle glass./ We are two birds/ washing in the same mirror./ We were fair game/ but we have kept out of the cesspool […]/ Hold me, my dear, hold me" (246).

The lesbian fantasies envisioned by Sexton are detailed with vivid and striking imagery making references to a wide array of subjects – psychology, politics, music, mythology, poetry, nature – which should be fascinating to every little girl. The witch/ aunt relation is also archetypal and interchangeable, each aunt potentially turning into a witch at any moment and vice versa – in Sexton's poem it just happens in a new stanza. A major difference from these homoerotic lucid dreams and the heterosexual ones in "Snow White" is that the one with the unicorn is given in one line. As for the subsequent animalistic ones, they are all suggested and are quite repugnant to the imagination. And here comes the third major distinction – Rapunzel is "a beautiful girl" (247). Nowhere do we find this information in "Snow White" or in the would-be-queen daughter of the miller. Sexton also provides the witch with a clear purpose, which is based on meanings derived from the original: "None but I will ever see her or touch her" (247).

In this lengthy prelude to the meeting with the prince, we have a magical lesbian world which is compared to a much more mundane one of male courtship. Another psychological element – a true experiment, just like with "Rumpelstiltskin", is the fact that Rapunzel has never seen a man to this moment and so when she eventually does, she asks him questions containing her clear amazement: "What is this beast, she thought,/ with muscles on his arms/ like a bag of snakes? What is this moss on his legs?/ What prickly plant grows on his cheeks?" (248). In their interactions Sexton shows the errant prince and the long-haired girl as two worlds that touch with all the wonder of it, but no detail or dreams as in the lesbian prelude. When they are finally together, Sexton is again laconic: "They lived happily as you might expect/ proving that mother-me-do/ can be outgrown […]/ The world, some say,/ is made up of couples./ A rose must have a stem" (249). As for Mother Gothel, the witch, she withers not having a girl to play with (249). Sexton's own commentary is contained in these three short sentences – *some say* that

the *world is made up of couples*, strongly suggesting that the couple is a heterosexual one, obviously the witch and the girl do not subscribe to that category – they have to hide and can never show themselves as being inseparable to the world – but this is just someone's opinion like any other. Some say so, some do not. Another careful metaphor is the *rose* and the *stem*, suggesting that for beauty to blossom, it needs solid support, which can only be provided by a man. And last, but not least, not having found another girl, evidently Mother Gothel in Sexton's version loved Rapunzel very much and would not replace her with another.

The examined poems might not have been so shocking in the year of their publication – 1971 when the USA had gone through its sexual revolution. It had led to huge numbers of hippies living in communes where free love (also group orgies) was practiced with the most notorious of them bringing an abrupt end to the 1960s – the summer of '69 when members of the Manson's family committed their heinous crimes. In the poem cycle the witch-narrator addresses several children and tells them adapted versions of the beloved Grimm's tales, with minimal modifications, to a major transformative effect. While the first two can be cautionary tales about mediocrity in modern girls, as well as about the unacceptance of the *other*, the last story is a clear case of imposed lesbian experience not only on Rapunzel, but also, as an example, on the listeners who were hardly aware of these underlining motifs in the original. We should say that Rapunzel is entirely unaware in either version and in both versions, she gets a timely rescue before things spin out of control, or shall we say, before *compulsory lesbianism* becomes the only norm for her which will determine her sexual preferences. Still, the question remains if these poems could be used as children's literature now, in 2021, and the answer comes fast – that in the state of global pandemic when educational establishments and cultural institutions are closing their doors for on-site presence, and people have become paranoid and psyched into believing everything they are told, these tales could be proclaimed as innovative and bold in offering new perspectives for the children by some or decried as filthy and obscene by others. Could they ever be read by children with an educational purpose? The time for that has not come yet and it may never come.

3.2. Plath and her *Juvenilia* – What do American youngsters transform into?

Plath's early poems, although largely dismissed by Hughes under the term *Juvenilia*, contain many gems which are revelatory of the childhood Sylvia and the other children of the epoch had. The transformations in her poetry of the period will be shown to be closer to Del Toro's enchanted world of terrifying monsters than to Carroll's bizarre creatures.

In the poem "Bitter Strawberries" the speaker is a small girl who is picking strawberries together with other kids under the supervision of a "woman", thus indicating an opposition – *child*/ *adult*. The female relationship from Sexton's "Rapunzel" is stripped to its rigid structure of subordination with all eroticism gone. The opposition between the young strawberry pickers and their supervisors is defined in terms of *us* and *them* – signaled with the very beginning of the poem: "They talked about the Russians" (*CP* 299). The children are even further diminished by the fact that they are "squatted down between the rows" (*CP* 299). The "woman" says out loud for everyone to hear: "Bomb them off the map" (*CP* 299) sounding very much like the Queen of Hearts' "Off with their heads" from *Alice in Wonderland* (72). In one of Plath's fantasies aged 18, she does not exclude the possibility of falling in love with a Russian boy and living with him (*J* 46). The brutal call to annihilation juxtaposed with Plath's romantic predisposition to the Russians evokes Yeats's "Tread softly because you tread on my dreams" (74). All of a sudden, as if in a Pink Floyd transformation from *The Wall*, "The horseflies buzzed, paused and stung./ And the taste of strawberries/ Turned thick and sour" (*CP* 299), strongly suggesting the unexpressed transformation of stinging and biting insects into airplanes that bomb the strawberries, turning them into poison not unlike the contaminated strawberries from Vesna Goldsworthy's *Chernobyl Strawberries*. The children are made to move only in the squatting position in which they are, like some giant frogs, "Leaping awkward and long-legged/ Across the rutted road" (*CP* 299). Young men have been given a more privileged – erect position from which they are "hoeing lettuce, weeding celery" (*CP* 299). In the spatial division in the strawberry field, the *bronzed young men* are handsome giants who command the air view; young adults, they have accepted the indoctrination to which they

have been subjected. From down the rows rises "the little girl/ With blond braids" (*CP* 299) who protests, *Don't*, "her blue eyes swam [swimming] with vague terror" (*CP* 300).

In this remarkable little poem from her adolescence which refers to earlier times – possibly the end of the 1940s, Plath manages to capture the spirit of 1950s America where children had to do field work similar to practices in the Comecon under the supervision of the adults, activities that were used by the adults on both sides of the Berlin Wall to indoctrinate the children into hating everything on the other side of the Wall. Silenced into submission, the children become an obedient mass that with machine-like precision movements is "snapping off the stem/ Between thumb and forefinger" (*CP* 300), thus completely transformed into cutting the life of the strawberries which are spurting poison with a vengeance.

In "Dirge for a Joker" in a Shakespeare's sonnet form Plath explores the ironies underlining each single gesture which is supposed to be the expression of a sincere and unaffected emotion: "Always in the middle of a kiss/ Came the profane stimulus to cough;/ Always from the pulpit during service/ Leaned the devil prompting you to laugh" (*CP* 302). Plath reacts very strongly against all falsehood contained in conventions which require us to act accordingly. Just like the romantic conventions which predetermine an idealistic communing with nature on part of the lyrical speaker who finds himself or herself inside the convention, the young speaker in this poem is convinced that life is made up of conceits which are made instantaneously untenable by a natural human reaction which is supposed to be suppressed while the convention lasts, leading to Plath's conclusion: "You never altered your amused belief/ That life was a mere monumental sham" (*CP* 302). The sad truth, as seen by the speaker, is that people's lives are a cruel joke – "from the comic accident of birth/ To the final grotesque joke of death" (*CP* 303).

This poem, just like the passages from the *Journals*, establishes Plath as an atheist, possibly a result of her prayers for her father's health that went unanswered followed by her declaration that her communication with God had come to an end. It is worth recalling Emil Cioran's famous lines from his *On the Heights of Despair* (*Pe culmile*

disperării) written when the Romanian philosopher was only 22. There he says with conviction "Life not only does not have a meaning, but it also cannot have one"[39] (169). And in the same work he asks rhetorically: "Couldn't we live without this world having one?" (152). Through his aesthetic of sorrow, he proclaims: "A man bears not only his life, but also his death. Life is but a prolonged agony" (66). Plath's poem has as its central theme the condemnation, but also the reconciliation to hypocrisy and here we can certainly discover the disposition of the disillusioned youth for not having a higher goal in life, for the impossibility for such a goal to exist. So, she finishes her sonnet: "Now you must play the straight man for a term/ And tolerate the humor of the worm" (*CP* 303). Instead of having ideals to pursue in life, Plath reveals the youth transformed into a young materialistic cynic.

3.3. Becoming the "serpent": Plath's *Johnny Panic* vs Dubarova's prose – the transformative power of the sea

In her essay "Ocean 1212-W" written in 1962 from the prose collection *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Plath returns yet again to her childhood, this time around from the perspective of the twenty-nine-year-old adult, the age when Sexton created her first major childhood-based poems. The essay shows the confidence of a writer who has proved her craft and who reaches back to times gone by, evoking yet again the mighty American Atlantic from her current life in England: "My childhood landscape was not land but the end of land – the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic. I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the clearest thing I own. I pick it up, exile that I am, like the purple 'lucky stones'" (*JP* 24).

Plath's stance is clearly detached, reflective, yet the intensity of the memory gives concreteness and clarity to every detail, we can feel the significance of the experience through the senses of the child that Plath was. To be able to plunge into the distant past, and with that, quickly acclimatize the reader, similarly to the described technique from her *Journals*, she indulges in a *Mrs. Dalloway* stream of

[39] All cited translations in this work with the titles given both in English and the language of origin are done by its author; in case of the contrary, the translator will be indicated accordingly. – a. n.

consciousness sequence based on a game of free associations, so she gets to the inscrutable sea: "The motherly pulse of the sea made a mock of such counterfeits. Like a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils" (*JP* 24). While in Dubarova's representations of the sea it rather resembles an old giant with manlike qualities, for Plath it bears the similitude of a woman, in Bulgarian the word belonging to the neuter gender, in English to the nonanimate "it" category of nouns, which technically puts it in the same place.

Once before the wave about to engulf her, with her mother catching her heels, the narrator is stopped for the first time from breaking through: "I often wonder what would have happened if I had managed to pierce that looking-glass. Would my infant gills[40] have taken over, the salt in my blood?" (*JP* 24). Plath's essay contains essential information about the first conscious, from the prism of the memory, transformation into an *other* zoomorphic entity, an amphibian that could have belonged to another world. Plath's suggested transformation asks the question if it is possible, in this world, to live in an alternate reality, if we could transgress spaces and change even physically in the process, like Jack Sally from *Avatar* (2009) or Leto II Atreides from Frank Herbert's *Children of Dune*. Since the zoomorphic transformation remains checked in mid-action, as already discussed in Chapter 1, Plath allows it to continue in the warped reality reproduced by the memory – in an inversed transformation of the skates "the shape of old pillowslips with the full, coy lips of women" (*JP* 25). While this anthropomorphic change looks grotesque and unsettling, the little girl turning into a fish is a whole new promising world that did not happen.

[40] In *The Bell Jar* the actual presence of gills in a human is a scientific fact but also related to death: "I thought drowning must be the kindest way to die, and burning the worst. Some of those babies in the jars that Buddy Willard showed me had gills, he said. They went through a stage where they were just like fish" (166). The return to this early phase of human prenatal existence is linked to losing the faculty of abstract thinking, reading, and writing, with speaking severely reduced to short sentences. To act upon it, Plath demonstrates how her protagonist tries swimming as far out as possible (167), a death realized in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Edna Pontellier's road to freedom, also tried by Jack London himself, without success, so his Martin Eden from the eponymous novel kills himself by swimming towards the bottom of the sea. Plath's novel is, above all, about a terrible loss of communication as well, leading to a complete communication breakdown, the road to getting "mad". – a. n.

Like Sexton who had a grandfather living close to the breaking waves of the Atlantic, so did Plath – a grandmother who had a house there. Her phone number OCEAN 1212-W sounds like an incantation when repeated to the operator – an instant teleportation to a marine Terabithia where the sounds of the sea were combined with the fascinating discoveries of beachcombing over "mountains of rattling and cranking purple stones" (*JP* 25). Such a location has all the oneiric potential for endless daydreaming as also demonstrated in Sexton's "Kind Sir: These Woods". Fantasizing remains in the realm of the would-be amphibian girl's imagination who in "the same sea-bitten house" (*JP* 26) dreams of the sea washing up "a drowned sailor" (*JP* 26), thus wishing to connect romantically with other men of the sea who, however, realistically can exist only in death. This realization, undoubtedly, brings necrophiliac connotations to Plath's account. At the moment of writing the essay Hughes may have already left Plath and she would fantasize about relating to dead men rather than to alive ones – in life Hughes could be substituted by no one.

In the essay, having felt her gills almost sprouting, she keeps identifying with oceanic creatures, each one reflecting her attitudes to different events in her life: "a sad sea urchin" (*JP* 27) upon the birth of her brother, etc. The narrator in the essay repeats the exercise unobserved – entering the water half hoping to be sucked in by the sea, but instead, remaining alive and out of the water she feels "a reject, with the dried black seaweed whose hard beads I [she] liked to pop, hollowed orange and grapefruit halves and a garbage of shells. All at once, old and lonely, I [she] eyed these – razor clams, fairy boards, weedy mussels, the oyster's pocked gray lace (there was never a pearl) and tiny white 'icecream cones" (*JP* 27).

Feeling rejected by the ocean that does not quite accept her as a worthy creature of the sea, the speaker keeps supplying food for her marine fantasies by describing how she would nurse injured starfish watching them regrow their lost arms (*JP* 27). The bits and pieces of conjured up childhood are finally all blown up into fragments of a sea storm: "Nothing could be seen. The only sound was a howl, jazzed up by the bangs, slams, groans and splinterings of objects tossed like crockery in a giants' quarrel" (*JP* 30). The childhood spent near the ocean for Plath is mythological and transformative on a physical and

mental level – she turns *amphibian*, occasionally borrowing other kindred marine animal forms, the sea elements turn into *quarreling giants*, a beach stroll potentially yields *a drowned sailor*.

In her short story "Sunday at the Mintons" (1952), Plath offers an early take on transgressing the water element, narrating about a retired brother and his helping sister, Henry and Elizabeth, the former a rather poorly concealed representation of her idealistic beau and the latter being herself. Plath employs a few of these female avatars – Sally from "That Widow Mangada" and even Alice from "Stone Boy with Dolphin" and "Among the Bumblebees", identifying with Lewis Carroll's Alice, thus speaking about her own fictionalized experiences as an omniscient narrator. Eerily prophesying about a certain part of her family routines with Hughes, Plath describes the boring daily existence of Elizabeth "circumscribed once more by domestic duties" (*JP* 301). Being a confirmed daydreamer, Elizabeth goes with her brother to the pier where her amethyst brooch falls under a rock. The brother retrieves it but as she watches suddenly speechless, she sees him carried away by an enormous wave. In her imagination he goes through yet another transformation occasioned by the ocean: "She envisioned a green, aquatic Henry dropping through layers of clouded water like a porpoise. There would be seaweed in his hair and water in his pockets. Weighted by the round gold watch, by the white-faced compass, he would sink down to the ocean floor" (*JP* 308). In the story the youthful imagination of Plath aged 20 pictures him "taking his afternoon stroll alone on Sundays, walking briskly in the dilute green light, prodding curiously at the sea anemones with his cane" (*JP* 308). As Henry spends more time on the bottom of the ocean, he somehow becomes part of their stately silent world: "Even as she meditated, the features of Neptune's kingly visage blurred, puffed, rounded, and there, turned to look at her, was the startled face of a much-altered Henry […]. Poor Henry. Her heart went out to him in pity. For who would look after him down there among all those slippery, indolent sea creatures?" (*JP* 308).

Through Henry's transformation Plath explores man's vanity and narrowmindedness since Henry changes but not for the better. Miraculously surviving among the marine animals in the ocean, possibly breathing with his gills, the ones little Sylvia was on the way of growing in "Ocean 1212-W" (before she started dreaming of

mermaids and mermen), he is ill adapted to life there, looks startled and unable to fit in. He was used to lecturing about maps, atmospheric pressure, the moon controlling the tides, but there he is completely deprived of the possibility to use his marine knowledge, being in the ocean. Playfully ironic, Plath allows Elizabeth to join him in a sort of a *Splash* (1984) reversed sacrifice – Elizabeth tries to follow him in the water, but a sharp gust of wind lifts the skirts of her lavender dress, and she is taken up in the air, herself and Henry being separated by all the water of the ocean. Still weighted down by his watch and all the trinkets he cares about, he is in the ocean while she floats over the waves in the air: "Her high-pitched, triumphant, feminine giggle mingled with the deep, gurgling chuckle of Henry, borne along beneath her on the outgoing tide" (*JP* 309).

The story is prophetic in more than one way of the relationship she was going to have with the man of her life – Ted Hughes – the rather formal manner of Henry reminiscent of the typical Englishman although Plath knew about England from the books she had studied at school. The ocean was to stand symbolically between them, but again in an inversed order – herself rather pulled down to earth, being reduced to domestic duties, constantly trying to adapt, and himself, lighthearted and carefree, master of his destiny, a modern womanizer who could not commit to loving and being with one woman, riding the uplifting air currents.

The short story, the most revelatory of her relationship with her father and symbolic of her identification with Carroll's heroine is "Among the Bumblebees". Plath's father was a passionate apiarist and the bees he kept were an eternal object of fascination for Plath – in 1962 she was to write the so-called "Bee Poems", a sequence of five poems reconnecting yet again with him. In "Among the Bumblebees", we are presented with Plath's image of her father as a well-intentioned giant who could always comfort and reassure her with his very intimate presence: "For Alice Denway's father had been a giant of a man. In the blue blaze of his eyes was concentrated the color of the whole overhead dome of sky, and when he laughed, it sounded as if all the waves of the ocean were breaking and roaring up the beach together" (*JP* 310).

Again, as is the case with other appearances of Plath's father in fiction "The Colossus" and "Daddy", the latter containing a blended yet differentiated portrayal of both her father and Ted Hughes, her father is a mythological figure identifying with the mighty ocean. He acts like a house god who establishes apparent order and harmony in the house, but these are just appearances. Her brother Warren (the real name of Plath's brother) is suffering from a mischievous Alice's covert intervention under the table where she kicks him so that he would have to prove his being a man by not squealing on her, so his manly reaction of not turning her in results in tears on his part and Alice wins yet another point with her father for being a girl who does not cry, while Warren is comforted by their mother (*JP* 312). The atmosphere in the story is homey and Alice manages to peek into her father's godlike activities at Boston University – his correcting the works of the students as a power technique of keeping them under control: "There will be,' her father intoned in mock severity, with a black frown, 'a weeping and wailing and a gnashing of teeth" (*JP* 312), referring to their reaction upon receiving their marks. Alice pictures him in the culminating moment: "From up there, like a king, high on a throne, he would call out the names in his thundering voice, and the people would come, trembling and frightened, to take their papers" (*JP* 312). On the beach he swims powerfully in the ocean while she watches him from the shore where the waves break. She seems to be the only one who can command this god as when she calls him, he returns to take her for a swim out on his back (*JP* 313), thus allowing her to tame the deep waters of the ocean: "the water, black and deep beneath her, would seem calm and friendly" (*JP* 313). The story goes on to add details of father-daughter intimacies in which she grows ever stronger with the sensation that powerful as he is, he is but a "tame lion" (*JP* 314) in her hands. It is through this vital for the little girl communication that she also connects to the raging elements outside the house, establishing harmony with them as well, like Jack Sally braving the aerial challenges from *Avatar* with the help of his *ikran*:

> Sitting on her father's lap in the den, watching the waves at the end of the street whipped to a ragged froth of foam and blown spray against the seawall, Alice learned to laugh at the destructive grandeur of the elements. The swollen purple and black clouds broke open with

> blinding flashes of light, and the thunderclaps made the house shudder to the root of its foundations. But with her father's strong arms around her and the steady reassuring beat of his heart in her ears, Alice believed that he was somehow connected with the miracle of fury beyond the windows, and that through him, she could face the doomsday of the world in perfect safety (*JP* 314).

Although Alice feels godly in the presence of her father, she is not a true mistress of the elements the way that he is their master, which requires his daily presence next to her. His power of control is so comprehensive that he is able to catch a bee in flight and release it before he gets stung since the bees will not even sting him, awed by his powers (*JP* 315), a textual reference to "Bitter Strawberries" where the bees turn into war airplanes. With this potential transformation of theirs, Alice's father proves to be the undisputed master of all living things under the sky.

So much more incomprehensible then to Alice appears her father's sudden illness (gradual in reality) which confines him to bed, but like Carroll's heroine she does not comment on the things she finds puzzling but rather describes them. Although he looks like an ancient Greek god that has been hurt in a battle and who manages to control the other members of the household even from his seemingly helpless position, the character of the doctor also appears and his solemn conspiratorial whisperings with her mother (*JP* 315) sow the first germs of the devil in disguise, the "Herr Lucifer" from "Lady Lazarus". The same scene also reveals the mother to be a duplicitous figure that can never be fully trusted – she is the one that sends her daughter to the nightmarish ECT and insulin treatments that Esther (Plath) undergoes in *The Bell Jar* perhaps a year after the writing of this short story.

This realization is further disclosed in a few words exchanged with the mother: "Be nice, Alice,' she begged. 'The doctor's here to help Father.' That was not true. Father did not need any help. The doctor was making him stay in bed; he shut out the sun and that was making Father unhappy" (*JP* 315). The stern stoic model of tolerating pain and hardships is manifested in her father's not blinking when the needle pierces his flesh and so she swallows her tears wanting to prove to her father that in his moments of suffering she can be as heroic as him (*JP* 316). The last moments of the father reveal him as the subdued giant

who has proved his greatness in life and who was the true master of the living universe only to become a silent part of it in death and so be resurrected time and time again in memory. Alice's parting moments with him are of betrayal for the fact that he could not be always with her, the empowering protector who made her feel like a goddess: "Lost and betrayed, she slowly turned away and left the room. That was the last time that Alice Denway saw her father. She did not know then that in all the rest of her life there would be no one to walk with her, like him, proud and arrogant among the bumblebees" (*JP* 316).

In this touching family story Plath makes a vivid memorable portrait of her father that helps better understand her anger at him from the poem "Daddy", in the fact that his betrayal of her has prompted her to seek his figure in Ted Hughes and finally her hitherto unshaken faith in him has revealed him to be even more dangerously duplicitous than her mother, with him as Hughes who leaves her yet again much more miserable than the little girl who wanted to be goddess and who lost her *ikran* for controlling the universe.

Having become half-amphibian or having a male character complete the ichthyological transformation that she was probably afraid to go through with makes Plath's characters less part of the otherworldly half-human, half-animal beings than the half-serpent, half-human Alice makes the girl a true serpent in Carroll's book. The reason for that is that the sea creatures in Plath's texts remain more realistically mute than Carroll's nonsense talking bizarre creations. Still, the desire to transgress the human form and be an indescribable and unknowable *other* is part of a magical childhood in which the child could play God. From the marine zoomorphic transformations to identifying with the gods of the sea, Plath's mythological childhood spent near the ocean is woven in lore that proves prophetic as regards her future marriage and relationships with men. Plath tried to be the grown-up goddess, but the world was not so pliable in her hands and having forever lost her faithful *ikran* she had to go through yet other transformations of her feminine selves before she could become "Lady Lazarus".

Just like Plath's, Dubarova's prose (short stories, journal entries and letters) is key to understanding better the poems, revealing some

processes and circumstances behind the scenes, but the prose is important in its own right, especially the short stories and the journal. Both modes show Dubarova completely capable of telling an interesting story with an enviable immediacy, lively dialogue, and sharp concern for meaningful detail. It is amazing that Dubarova managed to fill over 400 pages of quality literary material at the brittle age of between 11 and 17. Of course, just like the very young Plath, not everything she wrote is top-notch, but what makes her feat even more impressive is that she did not have the highly professional literary dignitaries such as Kazin that Plath had but had her schoolteachers from whom she could not have learned much. As for poetry advisors, the best known was the late poet Hristo Fotev whose poetry is arguably less impressive than Dubarova's by comparison. So whence the universal appeal and high literary quality of her writings? It is evident that if Bulgaria ever had a self-made naturally born poet, Dubarova was the one.

The first transformation I will discuss in her is a short story – a masterfully crafted modern fairy tale called "A Sea Tale" (Морска приказка). In it she uses Alice's conceit of falling asleep and dreaming about turning into a fish, a similar technique to Plath's in "Sunday at the Mintons". At the time of writing, she was only 13. Below I offer my translation of the tale in question.

The waves are still bashing their cold watery foreheads against my chest. My eyes, aching with fatigue, seem to still see the black mussels turn their pointed ends at my feet. In my stomach – swallowed sea water. It is welling up, surging towards my mouth. Perhaps unhappy for my having locked it where it is dark and cramped. My arms, like death-tired gills[41], are feebly dangling. The eyelids, heavy with the salt and water, will not close.

Сякаш още блъскат вълните студени мокри чела в гърдите ми. Преуморените ми до болка очи като че още виждат черните миди, обърнали остриета към нозете ми. В стомаха ми тежи погълнатата морска вода. Тя се бунтува, повдига се към устата ми. Недоволна е може би, че съм я затворила на тъмно и тясно. Като уморени до смърт хриле на риба лежат отпуснати ръцете. Клепките тежат от солта и водата, но не се затварят.

[41] Perhaps also a subconscious desire to become one with the sea in drowning. The imagery is strongly present in Plath and is both mythological and moribund. – a. n.

How did I insult the sea? Why did he suck my last drop of strength so cruelly? Why did he make my lips blue, blue, like the color of his depths?...

С какво ли обидих морето? Защо то така жестоко изпи и последната ми капка сили? Защо направи устните ми сини, сини, като цвета на дълбината си?…

The tired eyelids lap warmly the pupils of my eyes. I fall asleep…

Уморените клепки близват с топлина зениците. Заспивам…

I ride the waves with my eyes closed. Let them take me somewhere. In between my fingers, like annoying little snakes, are writhing blue and black seaweed. The sun is touching my back with the fiery palm of his hand. But suddenly I turn my eye towards the shore: "Oh, Sea, wait, take me back!"

Аз лежа върху вълните със затворени очи. Нека ме носят нанякъде. Между пръстите ми като досадни тънки змийчета се заплитат сини и черни водорасли. Слънцето сякаш е допряло до гърба ми горещата си длан. Но изведнъж обръщам очи към брега: „Море, чакай, върни ме!"

My arms turn cold and refuse to move. Involuntarily, I bite into the flesh of a big wave and run out of air. I sink. The salty waters wash my eyes wide open. My body hits something. I fall through. But I breathe, I breathe! The air is wheezing between my nostrils and hits my lungs.

Ръцете ми изстиват и отказват да се движат. Без да искам, захапвам плътта на една висока вълна и въздухът ми свършва. Потъвам. Солените води мият широко отворените ми очи. Тялото ми се удря силно о нещо. Пропадам някъде. Но аз дишам, дишам! Въздухът остро свисти между ноздрите и дробовете ми.

But where did I end up? I am afraid! How fast it all happened. I look at my feet. Uncannily, a stream of sunlight flows and creeps along the walls of my den. Now I notice that I find myself in a big cool vessel. I touch timidly the cold bottom. But this is an amphora! My initial astonishment is replaced by horror yet again: "Oh, you, stupid cruel amphora! Why did you swallow me? To see how slowly and painfully I will die of hunger and thirst? Why did you hide me and not

Но къде попаднах? Страх ме! Колко бързо стана всичко. Поглеждам към нозете си. Незнайно от къде потича струя светлина и полазва край стените на леговището ми. Сега забелязвам, че се намирам в огромен хладен съд. Докосвам плахо студеното дъно. О, това е амфора! Но първото ми учудване е заместено отново от ужас: „О, ти, глупава, жестока амфора! Защо ме погълна? За да видиш как бавно и мъчително ще умра от глад и жажда? Защо ме скри, а не остави морето да ме

let the sea drown me!?" I clench my fists and pound the high thick walls. I try to climb up, to get to the opening, which, strangely, is closed. But in vain I scratch and pound, to no avail I scream and cry. There is no one to hear. I fall to the bottom tired to death and I sink into the depths of unconsciousness… I am awake and horrified again. Oh, how my body hurts. But strange again – it seems to be changing its shape. I close my eyes. I feel I am becoming smaller and smaller. Am I running out of air again? No, I want water. The amphora suddenly tilts. Its neck crashes open and as if a callous palm of someone's hand thrusts me into the water. Oh, how strange I swim! My head hurts from the strong blow. I raise my hand to touch it. The horror of it! Instead of hands I see two wretched fish gills. Yes, my whole body is the body of a fish. Who did the sea mock at my helpless state so? Why did he turn me from man into a stupid fish?

The same callous palm of a hand is shoving me somewhere. Below me are moving marine deserts covered with dead sands. Ugly clams peer at me, looking like black bulging eyes. A strange animal with slimy slippery legs stares at me and shakes its whole body, bristling up, as if to challenge me to a fight. I close my eyes. I do not want to look at anything anymore. But unexpectedly, my fish body touches the bottom. I look around. I find myself in a wonderful sea hall.

удави!?" Аз стискам в юмрук дланите си и удрям високите дебели стени. Помъчвам се да се покатеря нагоре, за да стигна отвора, който, кой знае защо, е затворен. Но напразно драскам и удрям, напразно крещя и плача. Няма кой да ме чуе. Падам на дъното уморена до смърт и потъвам в дълбините на безсъзнанието… Отново съм будна и ужасена. О, колко силно ме боли тялото. Но странно — то сякаш изменя формата си. Затварям очи. Чувствувам, че се смалявам, смалявам. Но въздухът ми ли свършва? Не, искам вода. Амфората неочаквано залитва. Отворът й с трясък се отваря и сякаш нечия груба длан ме изхвърля във водата. О, колко е странно плуването ми! Главата ме боли от силен удар. Вдигам ръка да я пипна. Ужасно! Вместо ръцете си виждам две жалки рибешки хриле. Да, цялото ми тяло е рибешко. Защо морето така се подиграва с беззащитността ми? Защо от човек ме превърна в глупава риба?

Същата груба длан ме тласка нанякъде. Под мен минават морски пустини с мъртви пясъци. Грозни миди ме поглеждат, приличащи на черни облещени очи. Някакво странно животно с гадни плъзгави крака се заглежда в мен и цялото се разтърсва, сякаш ме предизвиква да се бием. Затварям очи. Не искам да гледам повече нищо. Но неочаквано рибешкото ми тяло се докосва до дъното. Поглеждам. Намирам се в някаква чудна морска зала. От

From all sides – a forest of blue seaweed. Some reach up flexible arms and tremble ever so slightly. Others spread enormous petals looking like fans, sewn up from tender blue silk. In their shade the sand looks violet. A few rosy jellyfish depart from this shade and soar transparent and light like bladders of air. A trusting seahorse alights without sound before me and looks at me with its black beady eyes.

Beside me swim schools of motley fish. But suddenly, in the fish world panic strikes. Something wiry and tight grabs me with thousands of others. It pierces my body, suffocating me. Now I realize. A fish trawler has cast its fishing net. Now I will die in it like so many millions of other fish. How cruel man is! How mercilessly he pillages the depths of the sea. Now I understand why the sea is insulted. For centuries he has been forced to bear – being locked in the shackles of thousands of ports, cut by the bottoms of so many ships, with its waters pillaged. I see nothing else anymore. I lie – a breathless fish. And the fishermen have no idea that they have killed me – the man with the fish body. Perhaps someday the sea will treat them like he treated me. Then they will be killed by other people who will be equally unaware that by killing the sea, they will be killing themselves.

всички страни — гора от сини водорасли. Едни протягат нагоре гъвкави ръце и потреперват леко. Други разперват огромни листа, приличащи на ветрила, съшити от нежносиня коприна. В сянката им пясъкът изглежда теменужен. Няколко розови медузи се отделят от тази сянка и изплуват нагоре, прозрачни и леки като мехури въздух. Едно доверчиво морско конче каца безшумно пред мен и ме поглежда с черните си стъклени очи.

Край мен преплуват пъстри ята риби. Но изведнъж сред рибешкия свят настъпва паника. Нещо жилаво и здраво грабва мен и хиляди други. То се впива в тялото ми, задушава ме. Сега разбирам. Рибарски кораб е спуснал мрежата си. Сега и аз ще умра в нея както милиони риби. Колко е жесток човекът! Как безмилостно ограбва морските дълбини. Сега разбирам защо морето е обидено. Векове наред то е принудено да търпи — да бъде заключвано в оковите на хиляди пристанища, да бъде разрязвано от дъното на много кораби, да бъдат ограбвани водите му. Повече нищо не виждам. Аз лежа — бездиханна риба. А рибарите съвсем не знаят, че са убили мене — човека с рибешкото тяло. Може някога и с тях морето да постъпи както с мен. Тогава те ще бъдат убити от други хора, които също не ще знаят, че са убийци не на морето, а на самите себе си.

I wake up. My head dizzy with my dream. Before me meek and quiet lies the sea	*Събуждам се. В главата ми тежи сънят. Пред мен смирено и утихнало лежи морето* (2: 8-10).

In this early piece of prose, Dubarova remarkably builds a story of zoomorphic transformation full of vivid details – from the *black and blue seaweed* to *jellyfish* and *seahorses*. The man-fish takes a closer look at the marine animals. It should be noted that Dubarova recreates a convincing animated depiction of sea life and that its representatives – plants and animals are endemic to the Black Sea, in the same way that we have the plants and animals typical of the US Atlantic coast in Plath – anemones, sea urchins and starfish. The textural properties of the coastline are also present in both – with Plath, the pebbly beach, while with Dubarova, the beach is sandy, reflecting its geophysical qualities in Boston and Burgas, respectively. Just like with Plath, the portrayal of the underwater world is not entirely pleasant for the puzzled human being turned into a fish – there are animals that look frightening for the man-fish: *A strange animal with slimy slippery legs stares at me and shakes its whole body*. And again, like Plath, there are the cognitive perceptions of the amphibian who, in Dubarova's text, finishes his transformation and the only thing that has remained of the former human being is the consciousness. Unlike Plath, who keeps the story going from the imagination of the person not in the sea, Dubarova chooses to present the sea incident from the perspective of this human consciousness in the fish body. As a result, the sensation is sometimes painful with a naturalistic touch: *the air is wheezing between my nostrils and hits my lungs.* In "A Sea Tale", Dubarova connects to the world of fairy tales and her ecological presentation of the story is reminiscent of the underwater world we see in Andersen's "The Little Mermaid", elements of which are also present in Plath – the *King of the Sea* with his *trident*. In all three stories, Andersen's, Plath's and Dubarova's, there is the sensation of overwhelming silence, with the *gurgling* sounds of Henry in "Sunday at the Mintons", which gives rather an additional mocking touch to people's insistence on communication at all cost, also mocked at in *Splash* where the mermaid, upon the insistence of Allen (Tom Hanks), speaks in her own sea language and all TV sets in the room burst to pieces.

The transformation in Dubarova's text has a very clear purpose – to show the world from the perspective of a fish that has fallen victim to humans, but a fish with human consciousness, thus presupposing that fish and humans can be completely identical in their perceptions and mentality once put in the same body and the same environment, with the difference that fish do not speak. This presumption is, of course, naïve and is entirely within the concerns of the little girl aged 13 that Dubarova was. Plath, being much more mature, in at least 2 texts stops at the transformation to an amphibian body, both evoking the soviet writer's representation of an amphibian man's experiences, Alexander Belyaev in his *The Amphibian Man* (*Человек-амфибия*) from 1928. As mentioned, Dubarova, unlike Plath, did not have the best teachers in literature and writing. Still, her achievement is exceptional since she got to her writing heights not because of the circumstances but in spite of them.

Aged 14, in her short story – essay "Happiness" (Щастие) Dubarova undertakes yet another physical transformation based on self-negation. A girl of the joyful summer and warm southern sea, in this text Dubarova yearns for the winter in her desire to stifle and annihilate everything that connects her to the summer, and which unlocks her summerly behavior:

The summer should not have come. It simply should not. I am waiting for winter. I want her to come with eyes – nests of cold, with arms – make-believes, with hairs – thickened with mud and sorrow. I will go to her myself, will sink into her lap. I alone will hold out my hand. She will lock my heart in her cold orbit. I will not shiver, will only feel how my heart shrinks like a tortured warm clover and will not speak. I will go white, all of me. My eyes, like sunny bunnies, will turn livid black. The fierce frost will bite at my hair. I am waiting for winter. I want to see my summer dead –

Не трябваше да идва лятото. Не трябваше. Аз чакам зимата. Аз искам тя да дойде с очи – гнезда на студ, с ръце – измислици, с коси – набъбнали от кал и мъка. Аз сама ще ида при нея, ще потъна в лоното ѝ. Сама ще дам ръката си. Тя ще заключи сърцето ми в своята студена орбита. Аз няма да треперя, ще чувствам само как сърцето ми се свива като измъчена топла детелина и ще мълча. Ще побелея цялата. Очите ми, приличащи на слънчеви зайчета, ще станат сивочерни. Свирепата скреж ще загризе косите ми. Аз чакам зимата. Искам да видя мъртво моето лято – изсъхнало в

withered in a gray chimney or right under the trees. And grim, like a predatory fish, will trample upon his hair and will go from here. It is then that my motley blood will darken, and my veins will interweave frightened into a forest.

някой сив комин или направо под дърветата. И мрачна като хищна риба, ще стъпча косите му и ще си отида. Едва тогава мойта пъстра кръв ще потъмнее и вените ми ще се сплетат уплашено в гора (2: 25).

In this striking text Dubarova manages to take herself apart and show how each single part of herself dies a winterly death. The winter is personified in a huge elderly woman with the irradiating power of turning everything white. This desire to kill all her youthful summerly emotions is a denial of the summer that prompts her to "go crazy" with all the enjoyment that it brings, and all the time spent by her beloved sea. The opening is remarkably profound and masterfully constructed, judging by the tender age of its author, and renders itself to many metaphorical interpretations, some of which can be the nuclear winter that could occur at any moment from a Cold War missile interchange – it was on TV all the time on both sides of the Berlin Wall, or it could be the study process as its peacetime in-house equivalent. Identifying with the winter effectively kills off emotions and renders one close to death or dying. It could also simply mean a desire to not feel so much because feeling brings her pain as so amply attested to in Dubarova's numerous references to school, lessons, and examinations. Still, it could mean seeing herself in an *alter ego* which is her complete opposite, but this *significant other* is invited to nullify everything that she is, perhaps an early longing for death which will allow her to fit in society more and which eventually became a reality through silencing herself by her own hand.

The second paragraph removes most of the above suppositions and relegates the negation of the summer self to school experience where winter should prevail and from which we learn that it was the desk alone and its color that made the speaker happy, but everything else was counteractive and produced the desire of freezing her feelings and emotions:

Then my beautiful wooden desk will not dare sing green songs for

Тогава вече моят хубав дървен чин не ще посмее да ми пее в час зелени песни.

me in class. I will not laugh at the red corrections in my class work. They will never resemble sunny bunnies to me. The glass in the window in class will be afraid to release golden paths of light towards my eyes. The port, sumptuous as a blue anemone, will dim its contour. And the ships will not trumpet touchingly when I am in class, being examined. They, light as dragonflies, will leave my cold town off to new happiness. And I will sink into gray bays of numbers, words, theses, and theorems. It is the only way to make my ravenous schoolbook[42] sate. He will look at me through his invisible glasses pleased. And I will, perhaps, become the queen of all knowledge

Не ще се смея на червените поправки в контролното. Те никога не ще ми заприличат на слънчеви зайчета. Стъклото на прозореца в клас ще се страхува да спуска златни пътечки от светлина към очите ми. Пристанището, пищно като синя актиния, ще притули очертания. И корабите няма да тръбят трогателно, когато съм в клас и съм изпитвана. Те, леки като водни кончета, ще оставят моя студен град и ще тръгнат да търсят ново щастие. И аз ще потъна в сиви заливи на цифри, думи, теми, теореми. Единствено така ще задоволя глада на алчния си бележник. Той ще ме погледне през невидимите си очила доволен. И аз ще стана може би царица на всички знания (2: 25).

This paragraph reveals a *1984* surveillance and supervision model – the schoolbook which bore the marks that students were given. It was especially incriminating for the school students back in the 1970s through to the 2010s. Even though it continued to be used until 2019, its psychological power was from then on greatly diminished simply because students stopped paying so much attention to it, and so did the teachers. The text testifies to the fact that the schoolbook was a formidable weapon for disciplining the children into obedience since they could receive a low mark even when they were not being examined, simply because they might misbehave – laugh in class, etc.

[42] The word in Bulgarian is "ученически бележник", a small booklet where marks were regularly entered so that they could be seen by the parents. Before the electronic register became a reality for most schools in 2019 and parents started receiving notifications for each examination of their children, the schoolbook was the only way parents could see their children's school progress. The schoolbook bore the school seal and the principal's signature on its first page and was an official document. Often it was an interminable source of domestic drama. – a. n.

The green wooden desk where Dubarova sat suggests the potential for sensuous delight, but the teacher in the classroom usually brought an atmosphere of dead seriousness similar to what we see in Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, hence Dubarova's appreciation of the British rock group. As the text suggests, Dubarova was easily distracted by the summer sounds outside – the *trumpeting ships* which turn into *dragonflies* and fly away where they stand a higher chance of making people happy. The *bronze Burgas* basking in summer sunshine from "Somewhere There" here becomes *my cold town*. The city perceived through the classroom, especially in summer, becomes modernistically unreal: *The port, sumptuous as a blue anemone, will dim its contour*. The prevalence of sea and water images related to parts of the city makes the school a frontier of harshness, gestapo-like discipline, and insensitiveness in the daily acquisition of new knowledge. To be apt to the task, the speaker will have to deny everything that she is – the sunny girl – and blend in the school winter reigning supreme.

Having delineated the parameters of the winter Dubarova continues in an incantation:

The summer should not have come. It should not. I am waiting for winter. I do not know her but am waiting for her. Perhaps she will not stop by me. For me she has not left a single drop, nor snowflake. Am I then the poorest of all?... Could it be that winter will never come for me? Yes, she will always avoid my green desk, my window, my sunlit port, myself and all my ships, smiles, sunny bunnies. She will run away from us because we are the fire, the summer, and her cold orbit we will melt …

Не трябваше да идва лятото. Не трябваше. Аз чакам зимата. Не я познавам, но я чакам. Но може би тя няма да се спре до мен. За мене зимата не е оставила ни капка, ни снежинка. Нима съм най-бедната!... Нима при мене никога не ще дойде зимата?

Да, тя винаги ще заобикаля зеления ми чин, прозореца ми, светлото пристанище, самата мен и всички мои кораби, усмивки, светли зайчета. Ще бяга от нас, защото ние сме огънят, лятото, и ще топлим студената ѝ орбита…(2: 25-6).

In this paragraph the short essay reveals a poem-like structure, poetry in prose as everything that Dubarova wrote in her early writings was

certainly poetical just like all that Plath wrote throughout her works was poetical, poetry or prose. The speaker's realization is that she would like *winter* to come for her although she is all *summer*. Her reference to being poor as a reason for not having the *winter* strongly suggests that one needs to have a certain predisposition to be able to associate with *winter* in actual summer. And then the question is if the speaker is so *poor* in these qualities that *winter* simply can have no hold over her. Dubarova's weaponry for resisting *winter* – her *green desk, window, sunlit port, herself, all her ships, smiles, sunny bunnies* are all strong insular reflections of *summer* which persist even when astronomical winter has come. All the transformed urban elements to the smallest item – the *green desk* work as a protective shield forever stopping *winter* from taking over and this is expressed in the sudden change of the subject – 'I' becomes "we". The essay ends with the hope which, as we know, turned out to be an illusion: "And perhaps my schoolbook, manuals, they will forgive every little deviation of mine because, after all, I am the summer's daughter… I am happy to have the summer!"| *И може би бележникът, учебниците ще ми прощават всяко малко отклонение, защото все пак аз съм дъщеря на лятото… Щастлива съм, че имам лятото! (2: 26).*

This essay is one that connects Dubarova to both Plath and Sexton yet again – in the accumulative image of *the summer's daughter* almost identical with the more sumptuous *summer queen* in Plath and *queen of the summer hotel* in Sexton. It also expresses Dubarova's desire to become *the queen of knowledge* corresponding to the overachieving Plath who in her *Journals* expresses the desire to command a vast knowledge of the world. The sad reality for Dubarova is that she was at school, not college, and she was subjected to an inhuman system of factological and ideological material present in almost all subjects without access to the examples of great literature. The rest of the short stories, especially from 1979, together with the journal entries, show a certain departure from the highly poetical expression of the early prose work, suggesting that perhaps Dubarova was advised to make this differentiation and so we get well-written short stories more in line with what was being written at the time in Bulgaria where the sea is hardly present. They contain experimentations with slang and dialogue, undoubtedly very important in studying the

culture of the Bulgarian 1970s, but not so important for this study of comparative transformations in the Bulgarian and American poet. That is where Plath and Dubarova differ the most in style since Plath naturally preserved the poetical expression in her late prose as well but there was no one to tell Dubarova that preserving it was not wrong and that she should write as she spoke, aiming for elegance, naturalness, poetry in prose.

4. Chromesthesia in the early poetry of Plath, Sexton and Dubarova

Of paramount importance for understanding the effects of Plath's, Sexton's and Dubarova's writings on a subconscious level is their usage of colors which can be done by studying chromesthesia in them. According to the *Merriam-Webster's* dictionary, by this term we are to understand "synesthesia in which color is perceived in response to stimuli (as words or numbers) that contain no element of color, called also *chromatism, color hearing*". There are set phrases in English which speak of the fact that certain chromatisms exist in everyday speech, but they are not so many. Some examples are: *white lies, white noise, brown study, greenhorn, black eye, yellow heart*, etc. While the sheer predominance of the used colors matters, it will also be important to compare the chromatisms the three poets created.

I will start by analyzing how basic colors are used and namely: *white*, *black*, *blue*, *green*, and *yellow*. In *The Bell Jar* the values based on the number of times they appear for the entire work are as follows: white (156), black, (101), blue (72), green (99), yellow (27), or in rounded percentage we have: white: 34%, black: 22%, blue: 16%, green: 22%, yellow: 6%. In *The Collected Poems*, white (221), black (223), blue (146), green (164), yellow (38), respectively; in percentage – white: 28%, black: 28%, blue: 18%, green: 21%, yellow: 5%. In the *Journals*, white (657), black (484), blue (451), green (479), yellow (211); in percentage – white: 29%, black: 21%, blue: 20%, green: 21%, yellow: 9%. We can also obtain the following average values based on the prose and poetry for Plath with rounding: white: 33%, black: 24%, blue: 18%, green: 21%, and yellow: 7%.

With Sexton's *The Complete Poems* the results are as follows: white (153), black (119), blue (82), green (105), yellow (67); in

percentage – white: 29%, black: 23%, blue: 15%, green: 20%, and yellow: 13%. As it can be seen, the results are almost identical, especially if we compare only the poems, both having *white* as the most frequently used color and *yellow* as the least used, with Plath having *white*'s frequency one per cent lower than Sexton: 28% vs 29%. The second most frequently used color in the poems is *black* with Plath: 28% vs Sexton's 23%. Again, if we consider Plath's poems we arrive at an equal ratio between *white* and *black* – 28% vs 28% with even *black* being slightly more frequent than *white*, which means that both opposing colors are equally important with her, but what does that mean exactly?

A chromatic comparison of two black novels, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morison's *Beloved* renders the following results respectively: for *Invisible Man* – white (385), black (321), blue (78), green (52), and yellow (25); in percentage – white: 45%, black: 37%, blue: 9%, green: 6%, and yellow: 3%. For *Beloved* – white (186), black (67), blue (47), green (19), and yellow (22); in percentage – white: 54%, black: 20%, blue: 14%, green: 5%, and yellow: 6%. While *white* and *black* are still the dominant colors with *white* having prevalence over *black* in both, the polarity of these two colors vs the rest is striking. For Ellison *white* 45% vs *black* 37% and Morrison 54% vs 20%, respectively. While the natural color occurrence in English does give *white* a dominance with *black* following, the total for the two colors for Plath's prose and poetry is 57%, for Sexton – 52%, for Ellison – 82%, and for Morrison – 74%. The subliminal *black/white* domination in the black writers is overwhelming by comparison to their white American compatriots with a clear perception of racial antagonism even based on the color juxtaposition.

The natural occurrence of these colors in Bulgarian is not dissimilar to that in English, but with Dubarova we have a very different color scheme. Krasimira Chakarova has provided visually clear chromatics of Dubarova's works where "an amazing crescendo" (64) reveals *blue* as the color dominating all the rest by far. Their percentage based on her graphic is as follows: blue: 47%, yellow: 22%, white: 20%, black: 5%, and green: 5%. Here the *white/black* total remains much lower than the *blue* one with only 25% vs 47%. By comparison, *blue* in Plath is 18% with 15% in Sexton. Clearly, Dubarova is the "bluest" girl

of all three by a large margin. It is also quite remarkable to note that *yellow* is the second most frequently used color in Dubarova with a whopping 22%. It only makes sense then to examine chromatisms in the three white poets based on the colors: *blue, yellow, white,* and *black*.

Natural combinations such as *blue sea, yellow sun, white dress,* and *black hat* will not be considered since they will not be revelatory of any significant distinctions in the writers' poetics. Instead, we will be interested in the so-called "psychophysiological parameters" of the used colors suggestive of cultural and individual differences. For example, Fitzgerald's "blue gardens" (32) in his *The Great Gatsby* is a unique image in tune with his modernist romanticism, from a signature scene which, combined with the "green light", "the champagne and the stars", has an almost psychotropic effect over the reader – it takes one on a trip of daydreaming, but also has synthesized succinctly what we instantly associate with the Jazz Age. To be on the same track, we can compare some of the early poetic chromatisms in these poets with emphasis on what is called "literary whiteness" in view of Plath's overly white syllabus at Smith College, as well as references to white poets in her *Journals*.

In "Pursuit" Plath has expressions such as "white noon" (*CP* 22) where the color complements the adjective "hot", but also renders vastness and spatiality to the noun. She can speak of "white air" (*CP* 24) which is "leaf-wreathed" (*CP* 24) in a Keatsean rendition of sensuous nature, but with Plath we also have a clear detachment of the lyrical speaker from these images, not Keats's delight in losing and finding himself in them. In "Dream with Clam-Diggers" we have "white fire" (*CP* 44) where the color renders very high temperature. More poetic is the "white shadow" (*CP* 98) from "Moonrise", written in the early Plath's favorite rima terza and the combination refers to dying catalpa flowers casting it. The image offers, as Anne Shirley might say from the TV series *Anne with an E*, "more scope for the imagination". With the flowers falling, they form the white shadow on the ground which moves with the falling and piling up of more flowers and petals. This poem is an exploration of the symbolic unhealthiness of the white color. Plath sees "white bruise[s] toward color" (*CP* 98). *White*, as in Eastern cultures, is associated with death: "Death may whiten in the sun or out of it"/ Death whitens in the egg and out of it"

(*CP* 98). Plath is capable of saying the following enigmatic sentence: "I can see no color for this whiteness./ White: it is a complexion of the mind" (*CP* 98). This can read as *I can see no meaning for this whiteness*. The lyrical speaker is fully conscious of the fact that being white she tends to color everything in white, but with her this becomes the color of destruction, annihilation and effacing contours and forms. *White* becomes identical with meaningless life as in Cioran's affirmation that "life has no meaning", and in her futile attempts to ascribe it meaning: "I tire, imagining white Niagaras/ Build up from a rock root, as fountains build/ Against the weighty image of their fall" (*CP* 98), life becomes identical with death. Still the imagination tries to lodge secure images with the white color: "socketed white stars", "white flesh [paired] to the white bone" (*CP* 98). The physical and mental rethinking of this "whiteness" gradates to the striking "the white stomach may ripen yet" (*CP* 98). In "The Snowman on the Moor" Plath uses the color in "corpse-white" (*CP* 59). In "Mayflower" Plath inverses *black* and *white* to create a psychological effect of desolation vs effacement: "black winter" vs "white bloom" (*CP* 46). Plath even has a poem on "whiteness" – "Whiteness I remember" (*CP* 84) referring to her experiences riding a horse where she tries to connect in a pleasant manner to *white*, but not very successfully and this is the only positive connection she can find. In "Electra on Azalea Path" whiteness again is linked to death in "a durable whiteness" (*CP* 117).

Plath interestingly inverts *black* and *white* in more than one poem, but that does not give *black* any positive connotations even though the lyrical speaker expresses a liking for *black* (the black ravens) for at least it has a *color*. In "Dialogue between Ghost and Priest" November is "black" (*CP* 21) and the "blue haze" that is in the air does not dispel a depressing atmosphere. In "The Glutton" the lyrical speaker declares she has a "black luck" (*CP* 22). In "Recantation" Plath speaks of her "black pilgrimage" (*CP* 41) rendering the sensation of despondence and even though her "darling ravens are flown" (*CP* 42). The poem finishes on a note of contrast: "her white hands" (*CP* 26) which puts the *black* chromatism in a tense interaction with the concrete *white hands*, *black* being more loaded with a sense of hopelessness which relates to the helplessness of the *white* hands. In "Spider" Plath uses "black alacrity" (*CP* 49) referring to the spider cocooning its

victim, which is again symbolic of forthcoming sinister death. In "Everlasting Monday" Plath again inverses colors and we have "black frost" (*CP* 62) which in the context of the poem comes across again as a symbol of hopelessness.

Apart from the usual symbols associated with these four colors, *blue* also typically stands for sadness. In "Dialogue between Ghost and Priest" reminiscent of the dialogue between Christopher Marlowe's Dr Faustus and Mephistopheles, the ghost exhibits "blue pallor" (*CP* 38) coming out of the mist and, like the devil in the Renaissance writer's play, confirms that "Earth is my [his] haunt" (*CP* 38) and solemnly declares that "there is no higher court than man's red heart" (*CP* 39) referring to the seat of human feelings and emotions, strongly suggesting that men are above all endowed with and subject to feelings. In "Hardcastle Crags" Plath uses "moon-blued crooks" (*CP* 62) alluding to a multiple effect of the moonshine. In "A Winter's Tale" we have "red-nosed", "blue-caped women" (*CP* 87) who are begging. While *blue-caped* is not a true chromatism, there is more to the idea of the cape – that is, women enveloped or shrouded in *blue* (sorrow). Occasionally *blue* and *black* can merge into "blueblack" (*CP* 108) in "The Bull of Bendylaw", referring to the color of the stormy ocean. In "Pursuit" Plath uses "yellow gaze" (*CP* 23) to describe the gaze of a panther man. In "Faun" we have "yellow eyes" referring to the eyes of owls which describes their color, but, just as with the "yellow gaze", create a sensation of sinister tension. In "Ella Mason and Her Eleven Cats" Plath uses "yellow glare" (*CP* 54) to refer to the combined effect of the eyes of cats on guard. This sense of insecurity, tension and ominousness is present in "The Manor Garden" where the heavens are "yellow" (*CP* 125). In "Candles" we have "tentative yellows" referring to the color, flames, and heat of candles.

In the early Sexton *white* does not have the sinister connotations we see in Plath and is used more traditionally, a stand-out chromatism related to it from "The Truth the Dead Know" is: "whitehearted water" (49) which should be understood as light-hearted or transparent, but also as devoid of any color of the heart as would be *red*, *black*, or *yellow*. All in all, *white* does not have very positive psychophysiological parameters in her, either, if we think of "Snow White". Although she, like Plath, identifies with *white*, she also seems to despise its effacing

neutrality, while the early Plath goes much further in her negation of the positive connotations *white* may have, thus dissociating them from White America and from herself. *Black* is also typically used by Sexton as she has "black air" (15) in "Her Kind" identifying with "a possessed witch" (15). *Black* chromatisms can be metaphorical or personifying as in "The Exorcists": "black arms of thunder strapped upon us" (17) or "black-haired tree" (53) as in "The Starry Night". In "Again and Again and Again" Sexton speaks of her "black look" (195), clearly meaning "bad" as in the opposite of "good". Being blue-eyed, Sexton has a sweet spot for this color, and she does create some interesting chromatisms with it. In "The Operation" she speaks of "blue-struck days" (56). In "The Abortion" we have "blue mountains" (61). She gets a bit inventive also with a "blueberry sky" (145). As for *yellow*, Sexton also has "yellow eyes" (57) in "The Operation". In this poem about a hospital experience following the death of her mother to cancer, we have the exact same phrase as with Plath, that "death too is in the egg" (57), but here the relationship to yellow indicates sickness.

In comparison to the early Plath, the young Sexton is much less experimental with colors. With her, they usually apply to concrete, not abstract nouns, that are objects which can be touched, a key word with Sexton who favors the human touch above everything else literally and figuratively. As a result, she writes in a deceptively simple manner, creating rhythmic poetry that everyone understands – there are readers who have said that they do not read poetry, but they read Anne Sexton. In confirmation with the almost identical percentage values in Sexton and Plath, their usage of colors is very similar, with the distinction of Plath's highly inventive and imaginative chromatisms. In them, especially, she is very far from glorifying her whiteness, just the very opposite, which, to an extent, can be said about Sexton, too, a very different image from "the white goddess" aura for which Plath has been repeatedly and viciously attacked, mostly for her highly visible international profile as a white poet.

The case with the early Dubarova is special and her inverted color scheme is very different from the preferences and color functions of the Bulgarian symbolists (Chakarova 66-7). In her "Synesthesia in Petya Dubarova's Works" (Синестезията в творчеството на Петя Дубарова), Chakarova finds that the former transformed sounds into

abstract symbols, while with the latter "the traditional for the symbolist poetry words-symbols and allegories (such as *sea*, *road*, *moon*, etc.) are made into color, sound and scent" (66). Another difference is "in the color opposition in Dubarova *blue/ gray* instead of the [Bulgarian] symbolists' *white/ black*" (67). Indeed, it would be enough to invoke Dubarova's trademark chromatisms of "sunny girl" (*слънчево момиче*) and "blue magic" (*синьо вълшебство*) to see that this is a precise observation with the remark that the word Dubarova uses (*синьо*) bears so many poetical connotations and nuances in Bulgarian that it is untranslatable in English, especially in Dubarova's usage. As for her colors of preference, *blue* and *yellow*, we can see them in these phrases. Dubarova's chromesthesia has also been aptly analyzed by Kalina Lukova who has examined her poetry and Krasimira Chakarova – her entire works. There have been earlier analysts as well among whom we could mention Veselin Andreev – one of Bulgarian suicide poets who took his life on the same date as Plath – 11 February 1991, renouncing previously his membership of the Bulgarian communist party.

In order to complete the comparative chromesthesia analysis of the three poets, I continue with the colors in Dubarova in the order of her preference. *Blue*, being her favorite color with her, it is the expression of her beloved sea with its breaking waves, white bubbly foam and incessant movement. As chromatisms, it is loaded with positive energy and can be found in phrases such as: "the blue of my blue song"| *синьото на синята ми песен* (1: 114) in "The Lie", and here we must say that *blue* in the song has nothing to do with what one would understand in English from this combination, if Dubarova's specifics were not explained. The discrepancy is so big, that probably "*синьо*" and "*синя*" meaning *blue* literally in the respective genders – neuter and feminine, should probably be translated as *azure* to render better some of Dubarova's nuances. In "Murder" (Убийство) the sea has "gray veins"[43] (*сиви жили*) (1: 72), which are strung by the effort to bear the oil spill, creating a palpable image of a rough sea with visible waves on a cloudy day. In the same poem, the people want the sea to be like "a glass of rum, foamy but blue, oh so blue"| *чаша с ром,/*

[43] The electronic version of the poem in "Slovoto" gives "blue" (сини) instead of "gray" (сиви). – a. n.

разпенена, но синя, силно синя (1: 73) with the perception that that magical *blue* in the sea can be somehow contained in a way that would make everyone happy, which, of course, is an illusion, the tragic irony in the poem with its blueness gone. In "The Birch Trees" (Брезите) we have "blue silence" (*синьо мълчание*) *and* "blue dreams" (*сини сънища*) (1: 86), and we should decipher again these chromatisms as having a certain relation to the sea – in the first – the calm surface with almost no sound, especially viewed from a close distance can be hypnotical. With the second, those would be dreams of the blue colors of the sea – with everything it brought the poet. *Blue* is often the color of daydreaming as in "Expelled from Class" (Изгонени от час): "Our blue desk is no boat"| *не е лодка синият ни чин* (1: 40). An example related to a landscape where it may still have markers of the irradiating chronotope of the sea as in "Desire" (Желание) where we have "the blue field" (*синя нива*) (1: 31), but this is just an epithet, not the variegated inland presence of the sea in Yovkov[44]. The examples are numerous and can continue.

Yellow is also a positive color in Dubarova and is naturally related to the Sun and the warmth it brings. In "November Days" (Ноемврийски дни) we have "the yellow heart of the autumn"| *жълтото сърце на есента* (1: 83). The created image is not very dissimilar to the English understanding of the chromatism – that is "friendly", but still foreboding coldness and the end of summer. From this *autumn heart* "the winds creep at a cool pace/ The joy left the sea/ shuddering at the cold embrace"| *изтичат ветрове със хладна тръпка./ Избяга от морето радостта,/ по-кротка от горчива морска тръпка* (1: 83). The sensation of November has been rendered in picture, sound, and color. Again, there are numerous examples of *yellow* in her usage, almost always in the mentioned relation.

Although with low frequency in Dubarova, *white* and *black* should also be discussed since the former is again part of a chromatism known to almost everyone in Bulgaria and for a good reason – (the song sung by the *estrada* singer Rositsa Kirilova) while the latter is the least used color with *green*, negative emotions being largely represented by *gray*. In "Goodness" (Доброта) we have the easily recognizable, but

[44] See Boev, Hristo. *The Different Dobruja between the Wars* (220-233). – a. n.

still semantically striking: “Sometimes I am white and good/ How seldom I happen to be white!”| *Понякога съм бяла и добра./ Колко рядко ми се случва да съм бяла!* (1: 176). As has been remarked by many, Dubarova often relates *white* to magnanimous unconditional goodness. It is enough to read this in English and remain flabbergasted as to how *white* can possibly be related to *good* so insistently with the people from the Caucasian race having initiated and committed the biggest crimes in humanity, but then we will remember that history as a school subject presented the world from the point of view of the white Bulgarian communist. Both the early Sexton and Plath, especially Plath, despite the attacks from decolonizing societies against the American poets’ *whiteness*, refused to establish a definite positive connotation of this color, Plath’s usage being predominantly very negative, the only one with an equal percentage of *black* and *white* in her poetry: 28%. We should remember that Dubarova had her own color scheme in mind, and she saw *white* both in the traditional sense of *pure*, but also as *calm*, *tender, relaxed*, *serene*. What is the sense, however, of her seldomly being *white* when she *is white*? One should read the proposed line of associations and, there is also the literal physical explanation – Dubarova would be heavily bronzed up in the summer and autumn, like Plath. It is enough to look at 14-year-old Dubarova in her jeans in a black and white photograph on the beach in Burgas and one would be convinced that the last thing that could be said about her would be that she *is white*. To top it off, with all the rationalizing of it, in plain Bulgarian, and much more so in plain English, Dubarova could come across as racist – the only *good white* character in literature that everyone would agree on probably being Old Shatterhand from Karl May’s *Winnetou*.

As a one-off example, but quite illustrative of Dubarova’s usage of black in her prose, we can look at her late short story “Jealousy” from 1979 in which in the select company of the teenage boys and girls, with a boy playing the guitar and everyone singing, there appears an unknown girl whose contours are not visible in the darkness. Everyone is listening to stories about “cold Swedish beaches and blonde girls” (2: 37) while “nervously smoked [ing] the cigarettes” (2:37). The narrator (Dubarova) says: “I felt frightened by her eyes though hidden in the dark. Could they be of those – the black, wild, and passionate ones?”

(2: 37). Here *black* is synonymous with *passionate,* but the story has a surprising plot twist which clearly testifies to old segregation practices and racist attitudes continuing to the present day. We learn that the narrator's locket has been lost, but it becomes clear that it was stolen and then found again, accidentally falling from the stolen handbag, which, to the narrator's credit, could have been stolen by a Bulgarian boy to impress the *swarthy* lady (2: 39). And then the final revelation when seen in daylight: "The same white dress, the bare feet. Then she turned, and I saw, what do you think… a Gypsy girl – one of ours – black, with fleshy lips and large teeth. In the body, there was nothing missing, probably very supple, but still – a Gypsy" (2: 39). The narrator is relieved by the discovery, fully conscious of the fact that a Bulgarian boy would not, under any circumstances, have a relationship with a Roma girl. The contempt for the black girl on part of the white narrator is unmasked and comes with a condescension, but this clear demonstration of racism in Dubarova must be blamed on the Bulgarian communist upbringing and education, which, as far as racial segregation is concerned, has not changed in practice to date[45].

It is much harder, by comparison to her prose, to find a *black* chromaticism in Dubarova's poetry with *dark* being the more frequently used adjective as "dark and white lamp-stars keep smiling" (1: 34). One of the very few is "black foam" (*черна пяна*) (1: 73) from "Murder" although one could argue that this is not a chromatism proper since with the sea pollution it is not hard to imagine the oxymoronic transformation from the naturally *white* foam to *black*, a similar usage to Plath's inversion – *black frost*. In a later iteration of "The Sea and I" from 1976 the lyrical 'I' says: "The countless crying seashells/ with their blackness touch me"| *Безбройните разплакани черупки/ докосват ме със свойта чернота* (1: 77), but this is simply a reference to the presence of the black mussels dominating most

[45] A major novel from World Literature such as Hugo's classic *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (*Notre Dame de Paris*) which educates the reader on *otherness* including ethnic, like so many others, continues to be excluded from the Bulgarian school curriculum. The works of the other Bulgarian poets of lived experience: K. Pavlov, B. Hristov, H. Fotev, A. Gerov and E. Yosifova have also never been part of the Bulgarian school program. (Fotev has been studied in additional literature classes but not as part of the main classes). – a. n.

Bulgarian beaches and the sad tone of the poem, in contrast to the early one with the same title, signals leave-taking of the sea. Still, Dubarova's economical usage of this color is to a tremendous effect.

This discussion of three poets – Plath, Sexton and Dubarova has shown many similarities in a common sensibility, poetic expression, romantic outlook on life, and in death. The three white suicide poets share a childhood spent near the sea – with Dubarova and Sexton throughout their lives. With Plath, despite the strong presence of the ocean in her childhood-related works, she is a shade more reserved to it than the other two. What all three, Plath, Sexton and Dubarova, also share was writing about extreme events and experiences, also reflected in their poetical transformations, that is, before Dubarova's last year when she became more mainstream as far as prose is concerned and more indirectly confessional in her poetry. In that the American poets were part of the American confessional movement, while Dubarova differed from the other Bulgarian fellow writers of lived experience who preferred everyday incidents which were not extreme, and which aligns them with modern confessionalists such as Olds. Still the main similarities are between Plath and Dubarova as regards the modes they employed to write about personal experiences: journals, letters, poetry, and short stories. This only confirms the correctness of Plath's perceptions of poetry as gendered rather than national (Ellis 14). So, the early Plath and Dubarova share a fascination with poetic synesthesia, also choosing common subjects including their parents, and disliking Chemistry. Both Plath and Dubarova make a difference as to the appropriate subjects for the one and the other. Dubarova wrote her prose more like the other Bulgarian writers of the day. So did Plath – try to write prose like the current American writers, but with her the much better developed American tradition made most of her short stories excellent while following the Bulgarian tradition, by international standards, Dubarova's stories would be considered good at best. Still, her early works at the age of 13 and 14 show great potential, which, unfortunately could not be realized.

Except for Sexton, both Plath and Dubarova gained fame and popularity after their deaths, again with Dubarova on a national much smaller scale due to the likely deliberate exclusion of her texts from school manuals and cultural events for a period of over 40 years from

her death and certainly not for that one-off racist story, which should never be taught at school in the same way as major classics have been removed from school and university curricula worldwide for their perceived racism[46].

Dubarova's short story, however, should be analyzed to study the detrimental effects over generations of a racial ideology such as the communist one which kept people divided, segregated and underprivileged with an oligarchic elite and party members vs the nonparty ones and the Roma minority, the latter barely tolerated. To this day, 30 years after the fall of communism, Bulgaria regrettably has not discarded this legacy, presenting flagrant manifestations of racism at different international forums. Apparently Dubarova was completely unconscious of what this attitude of hers meant in the short story in question. Already 17 years of age, she was a highly intelligent, painfully sensitive, and poetically very capable young woman; that was also the year of her suicide. Again, considering *black* in Dubarova we should be alerted by its extremely low occurrence frequency in her works, but that also meant that the Roma minority was off limits for most of her writings as if it did not exist, except for that one story. Likewise, excluded were also the Turkish and Armenian minorities, the Armenians being the most fully integrated of all both then and now.

[46] One of the most striking titles being Margaret Mitchell's world bestseller *Gone with the Wind* with 300 million sold copies only in the USA, for the positive portrayal of the KKK and the overall white's superiority attitude to the black people who are invariably portrayed as servants speaking broken English and unable to fare on their own once they are freed from slavery. Another one is Joseph Heller's classic *Catch 22* for the perceived portrayal of women as sexual objects. But then it should be noted that Heller's novel was never popular with women and for a good reason and the book's consignment to oblivion is to be regretted, as is the case with Mitchell's work as well, for both feature excellent passages, unforgettable scenes, and universal wisdom. Another book from World Literature for children which could be removed is Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* for the (in)famous reference to Pippi's father. Since the 1950s the US edition of the book has called Pippi's father "the king of the cannibals" to save this classic, but I, personally, see this as being a future problem, should, God forbid, man-eating humans ever become more emancipated there. The book has never been translated in certain Arabic countries for Pippi's overt anarchism and is likely to be banned in many more unless, the perceived white supremacy in Pippi's narrative of her father is given some adequate, more universally acceptable wording in translation. – a. n.

Judging by the highly autobiographical nature of her works, one is to conclude that they simply were not part of her world and that her *lived experience* may have differed from its rendition to paper in yet more meaningful omissions. That was also the attitude of the recognized big Bulgarian writers of the times who, in their own ways, evaded this and other topics as "unmentionables" writing about what was considered important for the Bulgarian ethnic majority, thus creating what has come to be known as "Bulgarian Socialist Realism", an officially sanctioned theory and artistic framework within which Dubarova is inscribed completely with her disclosive omissions, patriotic texts (not discussed here) and mostly acceptable topics; as for the unacceptable ones in her works, she could not have harbored any hope that they would ever be published.

As the comparative analysis has revealed, the three poets have shown their strong concern for the important topics of the epoch, with Dubarova through the prism of her school experience. The US 1950s and Bulgarian 1970s were not the most democratic of times, yet the American poets could be part of an interesting American movement – the confessionalists and they embraced the subject of the self with fervor. As for the Bulgarian poets mentioned, Dubarova included, their selfism had to do with foregrounding the lived everyday as a sure escape gate from ideological topics and by that they proved that an alternate reality was possible. Despite the early Plath's main concern with form, also established by other analysts (Ellis 16), her experimentalism with colors and structure should definitely be explored more as the examined texts have challenged common critical perceptions of their being significantly inferior to her later works.

Discussing Plath's childhood related texts alongside those of Sexton and Dubarova has established common themes, which underscores the commonality of experiencing childhood during the Cold War on both sides of the Atlantic. This has outlined not only Plath's early transatlantic universalism, but also Dubarova's overall universal appeal, as well as the fact that there is so much more to Plath's and Dubarova's memorable verse and prose.

CHAPTER 3: A YOUNG REBEL IN NEW YORK: REACTING AGAINST THE ESTABLISHMENT – A TRANSATLANTIC CONNECTION

1. The germs of Sylvia Plath's revolt: The Smith experience

Despite appearances – "public" declarations from Plath that she "wanted to be the girl to be God" at Smith College (*Sylvia Plath*), her *Journals* speak eloquently of her attitude on life, dating, family, art, and US internal and external policies. They reveal certain predispositions which were to become a reality in the 1953 New York summer at *Mademoiselle* magazine and later in Boston and England when she was married. Plath thus comes out as irreligious in the traditional Christian sense of the word, unlike Sexton who was to discover God towards the end of her life and *row* hard towards Him. Plath believed in the uniqueness of the moment and in her incapacity to capture it in writing to completion. To be able to understand Plath's autofictional expressions of her feminine selves and her revolt, we need to be aware of these attitudes which she managed to articulate very clearly in her *Journals*:

> I don't believe in God as a kind father in the sky. I don't believe that the meek will inherit the earth: The meek get ignored and trampled. They decompose in the bloody soil of war, of business, of art, and they rot into the warm ground under the spring rains. It is the bold, the loud-mouthed, the cruel, the vital, the revolutionaries, the mighty in arms and will, who march over the soft patient flesh that lies beneath their cleated boots. I don't believe there is life after death in the literal sense[47]. I don't

[47] This issue is further developed in the *Bell Jar* where Esther (Plath) says with conviction in an imaginary conversation with Buddy Willard, her boyfriend, "I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together" (59), which means that, just like Dubarova in "My Hell" (Моят ад) (1: 116), she saw the only possible continuation of the self in afterlife in the children begotten from the respective human being, hence Plath's ardent desire to have children and write high quality poetry. Plath, through Esther, even suggests that reading poetry could be more beneficial to a person, "and I couldn't see that doctoring all that dust was a bit better than writing poems people would remember and repeat to themselves when they were

> believe my individual ego or spirit is unique and important enough to wake up after burial and soar to bliss and pink clouds in heaven. If we leave the body behind as we must, we are nothing. […] All that separates me from being Thomas Mann is that I was born in America, and not in his hometown of Lubeck; that I am a girl, he a man (*J* 44-5).

Based on this and other passages from the *Journals*, Plath is consistently revealed as a young possibly unconscious dialectical materialist[48] whose fiction, however, attempts to transcend the material through expressing the ineffable – her ailing soul. Since Plath did not believe in its existence, in her autofictions she described with chisel-sharp merciless precision the physical manifestations in her depression-stricken failing body, reacting to the hypocrisy of the ones around her, unable to pin down its spiritual dimensions and consign them to paper, still painfully aware of the limitations of the method.

Her concern with McCarthyism and American foreign policy also finds a strong reflection in the *Journals*, especially when she read, for the first time, an account of the immediate aftermath of the atomic bomb over Nagasaki:

> When I read that description of the victims of Nagasaki I was sick: 'And we saw what first looked like lizards crawling up the hill, croaking. It got lighter and we could see that it was humans, their skin burned off, and their bodies broken where they had been thrown against something.' Sounds like something out of a horror story. God save us from doing that again. For the Unites States did that. Our guilt. My country. No, never again. […] (Mr. Crockett, that dear man, was questioned by the town board. A supposedly "enlightened" community. All he is a pacifist. That, it seems, is a crime.) […] Korea was never divided into "North" and "South." They are one people; and our democracy is of no use to those who have not been educated to it. […] "What if Women are Drafted?" Hell, I'd sooner be a citizen of Africa than see America mashed and bloody and making a fool of herself. This country has a lot, but we're not always right and pure. And what of the

unhappy or sick and couldn't sleep" (59), thus confirming the stipulation expressed by the author of this study, that reading can be excellent therapy for people in need of comfort or who are sick, if the illness allows the reading process. – a. n.

[48] In the *Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood qualifies herself as "unitarian" (57), but this is rather what Plath was supposed to be, not quite what she was based on the *Journals*, that is, a certain modification. – a. n.

> veterans of the first and second world wars? The maimed, the crippled. What good their lives? Nothing. They rot in the hospitals, and we forget them. […] – but to kill off all the ones who could forge a strong nation? How foolish! Of what good – living and freedom without home, without family, without all that makes life? (*J* 46-7).

From condemning dropping the atomic bombs and testing nuclear devices to the Cold War, the division of Korea, exporting "democracy" where no one wanted it, the neglect of the war veterans by the state, and the last stroke – the harassing of Mr. Crockett, her schoolteacher, Plath is remarkably well informed and her sharp criticism, when she was not yet 20 years old, encompasses important points in both internal and external American politics that certainly defined the 1950s. Her remark that countries not having had the exposure to and understanding of western democracy would find it "unusable" is prophetic of the disastrous American policies to that effect under both the Bush and the Obama administration that led directly to the rise of radical Islam. Plath's condemnation of the schizophrenic double standard in punishing the killing of one person in civil times and rewarding mass murder during a war is poignantly resonant with Charlie Chaplin's famous speech at the end of the film *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947). Also, the passage neatly synthesizes Plath's high esteem for the family as an essential ingredient of life.

While she goes to parties occasionally and has near sexual encounters with boys involving necking and kissing, she never manages to find a boy worthy of a serious relationship. Rather than persist in the dating routine, she spends more time on her own reflecting on the world around and feeling lonely, referring to the *loneliness of the soul in its appalling self-consciousness*, *the eternities of loneliness*, *burning loneliness*: (*J* 29-31, 94, 165, 318). As was seen through Lameyer's testimony, Plath was way too busy studying[49] to be able to get more actively involved in late teenage fantasies (*J* 39-40) but, judging by the

[49] Also confirmed in *The Bell Jar*: "I hated coming downstairs sweaty-handed and curious every Saturday night and having some senior introduce me to her aunt's best friend's son and finding some pale, mushroomy fellow with protruding ears or buck teeth or a bad leg. I didn't think I deserved it. After all, I wasn't crippled in any way, I just studied too hard, I didn't know when to stop" (60) – a stance that definitely qualifies Esther (Plath) as narcissistic. – a. n.

last letter discussed (*L* 1: 193), Plath also had certain criteria for men and not finding them, she was often disappointed. Crowning achievements for her efforts both at academic and literary forums were the Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge where she was to meet Ted Hughes and the *Mademoiselle* magazine scholarship in New York that spawned her *The Bell Jar*. Before arriving at Cambridge, she had already made her first documented suicide attempt while still at Smith.

2. Cella Serghi's antipatriarchal stance and Romanian modernism of the 1920s and 1930s: the prism of autofiction

Cella Serghi[50] (*née* Cella Marcoff) was born on 22 October 1907 in Constanța, Romania and died on 19 September 1992 in Bucharest, Romania. She was a writer, journalist, and translator, one of the most remarkable prose writers in the Romanian literature between the wars. Cella Marcoff adopted the pen name Cella Serghi after her grandfather, Serghi Marcoff from Bulgarian origin. The Marcoffs had old Dobrudjan roots, and the writer remained connected to her birthplace with the sea greatly affecting her childhood. With the beginning of World War I, the Marcoff family was forced to seek refuge in Braila and the absence of the sea expanse and breaking waves painfully marked the impressionable Cella. After a brief stay, the family moved to Bucharest and the little girl had to change not only schools, but towns, getting used to new environments. She studied Law in the capital and obtained her barrister's license in 1931.

In 1937 the magazine *Revista Fundațiilor* featured the first fragment of the novel *The Spider's Web* initially entitled *First Misunderstandings* (*Cele dintâi nedumeriri*) to be published in 1938. The debut was impressive, and the novel received the high appreciation of the writer Camil Petrescu who had become the man of her adoration. The debut novel was also praised by the already recognized Liviu Rebreanu and Mihail Sebastian who contributed to the novel's gaining popularity by supplying a banderol which recommended it to the readers. A year after its publication Serghi won the high praise of the most acclaimed woman writer of urban literature at the time, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu followed by one of the founders of the new

[50] Based on Cella Serghi's presentation in *The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars* (22-3). – a. n.

Romanian criticism – Eugen Lovinescu. The novel was highly autobiographical and was a raving success. Serghi cites an early review which is glowing: "An article in *Cuvîntul* (23 July 1938) N. Carantino writes: 'Diana, Petre Barbu, Miky [Michi] Alex will remain in the history of Romanian literature" (286). Serghi continued with her autobiographical approach in *Mirona* (1975) set in Paris. Another novel followed in 1983 – *The Youth, This Sweet Burden* (*Această dulce povară, tinerețea*). Serghi was not included in George Călinescu's monumental *History of Romanian Literature from the Origins to the Present* (*Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*) (1941) containing 948 pages for allegedly failing to send him her manuscript but has remained in print to this day through multiple reeditions where she kept modifying her text. Her first novel, on which the author worked for 5 years (Serghi 239), is very important to both Romanian and Bulgarian literature not only because of its memorable characters, but because it contains descriptions of several Bulgarian cities and towns, part of the description of the movements of the family as refugees during the war. In these representations of the respective places, Serghi makes precise topographic and photographic portraits of locations, cultural referents, ethnic groups, and their interactions, the novel functioning as a modern travelogue. Of great importance are her representations of Balchik under Romanian administration, undoubtedly the most poetic portrayal of the town to date in both Romanian and Bulgarian literatures[51] with vivid details as regards its cultural geography. In her novel, the charming sea town becomes the locus of an extreme passion fed by the magical presence of the place[52]. Serghi offers excellent portrayals of interwar Bucharest as well from the camera eye perspective of the first-person narrator.

Serghi compares favorably to the modernist writers practicing Romanian sensualism and choosing the autobiographical detail such as Garabet Ibrăileanu with his *Adela* (1933), in the more convincing portrayal of the *other* sex – with Ibrăileanu, Adela remains but a male fantasy. Her novel from 1938 also excels in the panoramic yet detailed

[51] An argument is made that the literature produced in interwar Southern Dobruja can be termed "colonial": see Boev, Hristo. *The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars* (20-1). – a. n.
[52] Ibid., 92-135. – a. n.

topographic and psychological portrayal of Bucharest during the epoch by comparison with other Romanian modernist classics such as *Calea Victoriei* (1930) by Cezar Petrescu, *The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War* (*Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război*) (1930) by Camil Petrescu, *The Accident* (*Accidentul*) (1940) by Mihail Sebastian, *Donna Alba* (1935) by Gib Mihăescu, and *Embers* (*Jar*) (1934) by Liviu Rebreanu. Finally, the autofictional mode gives her a psychological advantage over travelogue presenters of Southern Dobruja in fiction and life writing such as Anton Holban's *Ioana* (1934) and Mihail Sebastian's *Journal* (1940). As a writer of traveling experience, she also compares well with another Romanian woman writer, Anișoara Odeanu with her *Traveler on Christmas Eve* (*Călător din noaptea de ajun*) (1936). Serghi's contribution to the sensual Romanian Modernism was based on a strong feminine perspective of both psychology and sensualism, as well as on bringing feminism into the big picture. Her descriptions of land- and seascapes, based on techniques adopted from Andre Gide, Marcel Proust, Kathrin Mansfield and possibly Virginia Woolf result in some of the best examples of early Romanian experiential realism[53]. Other traceable links to transatlantic feminine writing include Anaïs Nin and Sidonie Gabrielle-Colette (Panait 206).

Alongside the abovementioned, Serghi's novel reads as a strong critique of patriarchal Bucharest, reminiscent of Edith Wharton's provincial New York in *The House of Mirth* (1905). It is a loud cry for equality in job opportunities, but also in conjugal rights. In its search for meaningful marriage based on love, it easily compares to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). In that Serghi far surpassed the renowned male fellow writers mentioned above. They, except for Rebreanu, would portray time and time again the elusive Romanian *femme fatale*, a much-desired object for the male gaze, as the ultimate proof that they did not really know women and if they wrote sympathetically of them, they failed to see that beyond the male

[53] A term proposed by Robert Alter in his *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, also discussed in *Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos: Similarities, Differences, Continuities* (46-7). – a. n.

projections of fatal women, were human beings who wanted to love and be loved in return, enjoying equal rights and respect with men.

Serghi's novel is highly autobiographical and like Plath's *The Bell Jar*, it presents excellent autofiction in the first-person narrator. As such the two novels are comparable in view of their common aspects: representations of atmospheric urban environments, sensitive intelligent women overcoming difficult circumstances, bold dealing with "unacceptable topics" such as suicide and womanhood beyond what would constitute a good measure. Managing to be all these at the same time, both qualify as classics and their critical responses to First- and Second-wave Feminism, respectively, give them a lasting universal appeal and importance.

3. Plath's dark New York vs Serghi's cramped Bucharest with regards to Boston, Constanța and Balchik

In her *Bell Jar*, Plath offers one of the most memorable openings to a city novel. It contains a rendition of the temporary bond between the narrator and the urban topos. In this case, it is of an unsuccessful identification, with the jarring ingredients of discord: "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions" (*BJ* 1). The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, is the "naïve virgin" that we have in the opening of the *Journals*. Her proclaimed ignorance of the reason of her being there does not mean that such a reason does not exist – she has won a place as a guest editor for *Mademoiselle* magazine and is living with other bright girls in a sort of a convent at the Amazon hotel which serves the purpose of a boarding house. What she means is that there is no connection between herself and New York and she does not really belong to the city in the traditional kind of way, the identification with Manhattan's landmarks – the famous skyscrapers where Dos Passos's characters, for instance, go in *Manhattan Transfer* and *USA* in a sort of a mammonic pilgrimage. This seeming disconnection 30 years later, however, is based only on appearances since Esther (Plath) *does* belong to the city but in a different category of belonging – that of the visitor who is to spend a month there, enough time to become familiar with what she will

consider to be important for her since everything will be new and potentially fascinating.

Malpas's discussion of *place*, *space*, and *event* presupposes that Esther, being a newcomer, white, and unmarried, will be having such "disclosive happening[s] of belonging"[54] (223) that will be compliant with her nonmarital state of a young white girl in her very early 20s. The opening lines of the novel are, however, indicative of another kind of journey, a sort of Conradian *Heart of Darkness* descent into an abyss where the New Yorkers become "the black savages" (266) that Conrad saw, not in the sense interpreted by Achebe, that Conrad was "a thoroughgoing racist" (343), but in one of the senses that comes across from Marlow's polyphonic narrative and namely that the blacks are inscrutable, impossible to know or understand, simply moving black figures in a whole world shrouded in darkness where inhuman practices are the norm. And indeed, the very first lines, together with the sensation of *sultriness* also introduce the forthcoming execution of the Rosenbergs. The sentences that Plath writes, so much like the polysyntagmatic rima terza of "Do not Try to Trick Me with a Kiss", are also discordant, bringing seemingly contradictory ideas together, ideas whose logic becomes clear as one reads on, but at this point New York, smelly, hot, and electrical, becomes an overwhelming foreboding of a live electric chair. We have the perception of the very hot concrete jungle of a city positioned next to an electrocution which adds to the sensation of *heat* followed by Esther's (Plath's) confession that she feels lost. And now we know why – not because she has no purpose of being there, but because she has a difficulty identifying with this hot, inhuman, dark New York. The truth is that Plath did feel strongly about the execution of the Rosenbergs, and her reporter-like mention of the event is reflected in her *Journals* where she says how impressed she was with "the bare honest unemotional reporting that gripped the guts because of the things it didn't say"[55] (*J* 541).

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[54] Ibid., 226, 92. – a. n.

[55] In the *Journals*, Plath also has the following to say on the subject: "They were going to kill people with those atomic secrets. It is good for them to die. So that we can have the priority of killing people with those atomic secrets which are so very jealously and specially and inhumanly ours. There is yelling, no horror, no real rebellion. That is the appalling thing. The execution will take place tonight; it is too bad it could not be

The following lines manage to convey a sensation of the unknowable city through the sense of smell again next to the augmented sensation of her actually going through with the electrocution: "the papers – goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves" (*BJ* 1). The city is presented as some sort of a deform *goggle-eyed smelly* creature with a *penchant* for peanuts that is always hungry, and the *mouths* of the subways are not unlike the stinking maws to its netherworld entrails.

The morning freshness of the Hudson River so palpably present in Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* is nowhere to be felt, nor are the possibilities of daydreaming: "New York was bad enough. By nine in the morning the fake, country-wet freshness that somehow seeped in overnight evaporated like the tail end of a sweet dream. Mirage-grey at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, cindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat" (*BJ* 1). While the gritty sensation of the New York air is present in Dos Passos's city novels, there are the possibilities to see it and feel it differently. Not so with Plath. The sensation she creates invokes Spengler's inorganic simulacrum of nature in his highly influential *The Decline of the West*[56] without Dos Passos's alleviating effect of daydreaming. Spengler's "deep long gorges between high stony houses with coloured dust and strange uproar" (2: 94) are well reflected in Plath's vision of *granite canyons,* a city scorched in the sun heat: *the car tops sizzled and glittered*. By combining auditory details with visuals Plath's experiential realism, like Dos Passos's, creates a physical sensation in the reader: the *cindery dust* enters unobstructed the exposed orifices of the streetwalker. The city is constantly moving in an optical illusion in the sweltering heat: *the hot streets wavered in the sun*. These motor movements of nonanimate objects are typical of

televised… so much more realistic and beneficial than the run-of-the mill crime program. Two real people being executed. No matter. The largest emotional reaction over the United States will be a rather large, democratic, infinitely bored and casual and complacent yawn" (549). – a. n.

[56] Also discussed at length in *Modern(ist) Portrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos* (101). – a. n.

modernist texts and again they are strongly present in Dos Passos as in *Manhattan Transfer* (298)[57] when one of the protagonists, Jimmy Herf leaves the Pulitzer Building and the Woolworth stretches a mocking tentacle after him like a telescope, taunting him with the inaccessibility of the skyscraper. The skyscrapers thus act like mocking stilt walkers – alluringly divine, but effectively grotesque in their Mumfordian disdain for the ordinary man. However, their place in Plath's novel is insignificant and rather matter of fact: "They showed us how to make an all-purpose neckerchief out of mink tails and a gold chain, the sort of chain you can get an exact copy of at Woolworth's for a dollar ninety-eight" (*BJ 29*). The young girl feels no desire for this kind of lofty identification which also appears outdated, the mythological skyscraper being reduced to an ordinary place for shopping. Instead, she keeps identifying with the Rosenbergs: "I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterwards, the cadaver's head – or what there was left of it – floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast and behind the face of Buddy Willard" (*BJ* 1). Plath's physical portrayal of New York is completely associative, like Virginia Woolf's London in *Mrs. Dalloway*. She uses the exact same technique to introduce characters – Esther's boyfriend, the medical student, *Buddy Willard*. By placing *the Rosenbergs* and a *cadaver* next to each other, Plath strongly suggests that the family are as good as dead while the positioning of the standard *English breakfast* next to the *cadaver's head* could be yet another prophetic premonition of what lay in store for Plath in England. It has been suggested that the choice of the girl's name – Esther is not accidental. If we follow the logic of the Brontë sisters in the proximity of the male pen names and the actual names, it should not come as a surprise that Esther is not very dissimilar to Ethel. Moreover, the first and last name of the wife before she was married were Ethel Greenglass, not a far cry from Esther Greenwood. In search for her true identity, Plath says emphatically in "Daddy", "I think I may well be a Jew" (*CP* 223). Whether or not Plath has the right to such an identification is a very different matter. With both her parents from German and Austrian heritage, the likelihood for

[57] Ibid., 32- 50. – a. n.

her to have been part Jew is not small. What Plath shows time and time again is that she would rather be a Jew than a fascist, being the two viable options for a person from German origin. As a result, her Jew identity is played out against a gestapo-like New York, more of a dystopian setting, where she is accosted by lewd men in traffic jams, called upon by unknown people, food-poisoned *en masse* with the other guest editors at a festive luncheon given by the magazine, and almost raped. And as Robin Peel argues, "The Rosenbergs cast a shadow across the whole novel, with their electrocution for espionage serving an important metonymic function" (203). And so, she sees her superiors and peers, the editor Jay Cee, the coed Doreen, in Sartre-like nausea terms, being disgusted by close contacts with their flesh, as a corporeal extension of their consumption in the city – food and other commodities, which receives considerable literary space in her novel, food serving as "a conveyor of identity" (Woodward 118). In an eerie presence in the created by Plath dystopic setting women's fashion is also strikingly ubiquitous as a reminder that life goes on, regardless of the protagonist's persistent recreations of repugnant images of sick urbanity. Just like the portrayal of food, it is given in minute details of playful senseless pageantry for the narrator who invariably feels lost. Still, Rebecca Tuite underscores an important role that it plays – as a continuum: "Plath exhibited an instinctual understanding that fashion did not exist in a vacuum, but rather functioned across boundaries of history, culture, art and design" (126). In *The Bell Jar*, however, Plath employs her art designer's impulses and skills so she can impart to it a strong sense of vacuity as a tangible upgrade on Fitzgerald's rather schematic symbolic representation of hollow glamor in *The Great Gatsby* and less jarring than the ostentatious outpour of it in the movie trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2012). Plath's vision, albeit the flashy outbursts, is persistently dark and they – as untenable as the blinding whiteness that welcomes the protagonist to the city in yet another confirmation of the already established disapprobation Plath had for the white color.

New York as a place of darkness both natural – dark spaces or darkly colored parts of the human body and metaphorical – dark human nature, has numerous manifestations in Plath's novel. In such places and around such people, Esther usually dissolves into the darkness and

manages to remain almost invisible: “It was so dark in the bar I could hardly make out anything except Doreen […] I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I’d never seen before in my life” (*BJ* 10); “I could see downtown to where the UN balanced itself in the dark, like a weird, green, Martian honeycomb” (*BJ* 19-20); “I swung to my feet and balanced dizzily for a minute in the middle of the dark room” (*BJ* 22); “her head was hanging down on her chest and her stiff blonde hair fell from its dark roots like a hula fringe” (*BJ* 23); “The carpet stretched from one end of the hall to the other, clean and eternally verdant except for a faint, irregular dark stain” (*BJ* 24); “A short dark man with a high, lisping voice” (*BJ* 36), etc.

The intensity of the dark colors, as the proximity of the pages indicates, is striking if one recalls the very opening of the novel where the city appears to be dazzlingly hot. On one hand, this can be an effect of the tall buildings and the deep dark gorges that are formed at street level. On the other, the reason why Esther sees dark stains, apart from the vomit which occasionally causes them to appear on carpets, by people getting drunk, could be a blinding effect of the searing sun – when one moves aside from the direct sunlight, one sees dark blotches that will move with the moving of the gaze. In its darkness New York looks apocalyptic: “It wasn’t the nice kind of rain that rinses you clean, but the sort of rain I imagine they must have in Brazil. It flew straight down from the sky in drops the size of coffee saucers and hit the hot sidewalks with a hiss that sent clouds of stream writhing up from the gleaming, dark concrete” (*BJ* 42). Despite the seemingly alluring homey feel rendered by the raindrops likened to *coffee saucers*, it just adds to the unpleasant *peanut smelling* taste that one feels in the air, creating an overall sensation of a bad meal. New York remains consistently dark regardless of where Esther is, even when she is visiting Constantin, the Russian UN translator she has a crush on (a dream come true with regards to the *Journals*): “Constantin’s room had a balcony, and the balcony overlooked the river, and we could hear the hooing of the tugs down in the darkness” (*BJ* 84). The return to the scene does not show much of a difference: “It was pitch dark. After a while I deciphered the faint outlines of an unfamiliar window. Every so often a beam of light appeared out of thin air, traversed the wall like a ghostly exploratory finger, and slid off into nothing again” (*BJ* 87).

Esther manages to peek into the dark heart of the human animals populating the city twice – when she goes off with Doreen to a stranger's apartment and where Doreen almost gets raped, but her friend seems to encourage it (*BJ* 18). As the sight is shocking for Esther, once back at the hotel, she treats herself to her usual redemptive cure – a tub of hot water: "I said to myself: 'Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter anymore" (*BJ* 21). Still, Esther manages to get entangled in yet another situation where rape is in the air, this time her own, and again in the company of Doreen. At that party she is tempted with a diamond and because she slips it into her handbag when shown to her, Marco, the diamond owner, decides that he has bought her consent to sex. In that he is gravely mistaken, and Esther has to fight for her chastity. At that point she, like Holden from *Catcher in the Rye*, has had enough of it, and it has become a burden. Holden is unwilling to lose it with a girl who is "phony", so he opts for a prostitute, but takes pity on her and only talks to her while paying her for a sexual service that does not take place. The ambiguous act of taking the diamond – on one hand Esther seems to encourage Marco's advances, but she seems to be of two minds about it – suggests that she may have accepted the inevitable act of being corrupted in the city by having sex with a "woman hater" (*BJ* 111), who, as Kate Harding convincingly argues, "were like Gods" (180-190) in the 1950s. Ironically, Harding continues, "it is the most *feminizing* experience the protagonist has that summer" (181).

Plath has had her rape dream from the beginning of the *Journals* and while resisting Marco, Esther believes at one point that it is *finally* happening (*BJ* 114), leaving Harding wondering what "it" refers to – the *rape* or the *first sexual act*, or perhaps both (184). Back in the hotel, the city's blackness reflects the darkness of the incident: "A stiff breeze lifted the hair from my head. At my feet, the city doused its lights in sleep, its buildings blackened, as if for a funeral" (*BJ* 117). With Plath, we no longer have the early modernist contrast between the lonely individual in the crowd beneath cerulean skies as we do in Dos Passos. Nor is this a return to 19th century portrayals of nature in unison with the protagonist's experiences or emotions. Plath's portrayal of New York is the product of a unique dark vision, similar to Rawi Hage's

representation of Montreal in his *Cockroach* (2008), in which even if the protagonist could be less depressive, the city would be overwhelmingly oppressive until depression sets in. It would be a mistake, however, to link the darkness of the city to Esther's fast deteriorating mental state as being the sole reason for that. It is rather the profound sensation of her inability to fit in and her lessening desire to do so that play a crucial role. From an overachiever who has shown assertiveness and determination in pursuing her goals, Esther starts feeling increasingly insecure in her dealings with the people of New York – from taxi drivers and bellboys to the magazine's editor, the pervasive kind of dark inscrutability Conrad projects from Marlow's narrative.

It should also be noted that New York is dark, but not dark by comparison to the countryside as would be the city in Dickens, it is just the place where Esther quickly unravels, making a precipitous descent into depression. As a result, the eye lens of the cinematic presentation is colored darkly and through this filter, very much as in Conrad's novella, everything around her assumes this color: "First Mr Willard drove and then drove. I don't know what we talked about, but as the countryside, already deep under old falls of snow, turned us a bleaker shoulder, and as the fir trees crowded down from the grey hills to the road edge, so darkly green they looked black, I grew gloomier and gloomier" (*BJ* 91). Mr Willard (Buddy) is her tubercular boyfriend, the medical student who has a relationship with a nurse while undergoing treatment, thus earning Esther's eternal contempt since she finds him *hypocritical*. This persistence of the vision remains linked to the sanatorium as well, with the unsettling comparisons to a human anatomic organ and the creepy visage of the President of the country who takes the form of a ghastly Big Brother from Orwell's *1984*: "The colour scheme of the whole sanatorium seemed to be based on liver. Dark, glowering woodwork, burnt-brown leather chairs, walls that might once have been white but had succumbed under a spreading malady of mould or damp […] The face of Eisenhower beamed up at me, bald and blank as the face of a foetus in a bottle" (*BJ* 93).

The ubiquitous presence of Eisenhower as the person under whose presidency the decade passed is linked to images of death and dying, without the spiteful vitality we see of Truman's doppelgänger

representation in Sexton's "Rumpelstiltskin". While images of Buddy Willard are aligned to cadavers, they appear alongside with homecooked food, thus instilling the sensation that he, together with the fancy food Esther consumes at the magazine's expense, is for the girl's consumption even though he is less worth it by comparison. Ironically, it is the fancy food that poisons her. Eisenhower, appearing in bottled fetuses is greatly diminished, like Sexton's Truman, to be the plaything of medical students, thus occupying a much lower position than Esther's boyfriend in the male entourage that she builds of men to command with her dead father being God Almighty. Esther's goodbye gesture to the city is also symbolic: "Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the grey scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York" (*BJ* 117). Her leaving the city is accompanied by a dissociative action which is yet another rebirth through dying that she is to undergo in Boston.

The Boston that Esther (Plath) returns to is not the Boston of her childhood – this is the city where she sees the first signs of her post-New York depression – the merging of the letters in one long word which she cannot read (*BJ* 130-8) accompanied by severe insomnia and her inability to even write (*BJ* 137). The beach with its irradiating chronotope of blue sea magic no longer functions, the effect of the sea being felt only on the beach itself – and that becomes yet another place Esther creatively uses in her tragicomic attempts to commit suicide – a sinister transformation of the desired identification with the sea. However, this time around, it is completely devoid of romanticism. Even when she is in the park, under the "Weeping Scholar Tree", near a pond, all she can think about is suicide – the Japanese specialty, the double-knifed *seppuku* invoked through an association with the possible origin of the tree. In Boston Esther feels like a prisoner because people know her, and she does not look presentable at all. She starts feeling paranoid about her bank account being blocked by the observing doctor, Gordon, and dreams of escaping to Chicago (*BJ* 146). The magical city of her childhood is turned into a city of torture and the electroshocks she is subjected to, similar to the ones Winston from *1984* is given, are described with unsettling vivacity:

> I tried to smile, but my skin had gone stiff, like parchment. Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal plates on either side of my head. He buckled them into place with a strap that dented my forehead and gave me a wire to bite. […] Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done (*BJ* 151).

The depiction is visceral and terrifying. It is through testimonies like these that ECT practices have come under investigation, but ECT is still used even in contemporary times in treating several psychiatric disorders, certainly in better conditions than the ones Esther (Plath) was exposed to, one of them involving the administration of anesthesia. ECT was introduced to US psychiatric hospitals as early as the 1940s and as *The Bell Jar* testifies, it was considered revolutionary in the 1950s. Its effects on the patients though, without the anesthesia, were not known. When asked how she feels, Esther cannot tell the truth because she is afraid the torture will be repeated: "But I didn't. I felt terrible" (*BJ* 152). She is naïve to think that this will stop them and indeed ECT is used repeatedly on her until she is rendered in a vegetative state. It is after the treatments though that Esther (Plath) resorts to her attempts to kill herself so she can end her suffering. And she is not the only case, there is another girl, Joan, who kills herself after receiving the same treatments and tricking the doctors into believing that her condition has improved. As Anita Helle poignantly observes, the fact that the initial pseudonym – Victoria Lucas for the writer of Plath's novel, was removed and *Ariel* was published in its restored version, after the elimination of Hughes's intervention, have all played a role in foregrounding the electroshocks as a highly traumatic experience and research has been done to establish its role in Plath's prose and poetry. The emphasis has been so great that "one Turkish translation of *The Bell Jar* blatantly features a head pinned between electrodes on its jacket" (264).

Boston is represented as a place much worse than New York where Esther (Plath) at least can be free and be a mistress of herself in her position of a prestigious visitor to the city. Boston is the place where

Plath lost her father and without him around, the city seems to be poised for her effective annihilation. Not much of the physical chronotope is given, the camera eye of the narrator moving in some sort of tunnels with restricted visibility straight ahead, strongly contrasts the endless literary vistas of Boston and Massachusetts of her childhood which once turned the city into a place of wonder and magic.

Cella Serghi's representation of the Romanian capital in the 1920s is initially connected with the sensation of moving from the magical Constanța of her childhood where, just like with Plath, she was happy to be near the sea, to the city of the wonderful unknown in her dreams of acquiring that uncanny superiority that Bucharest children have over others, something she can observe in her hometown while seeing them play on the beach and where she has to answer the strange question if they have schools in Constanța, too (56). At 14 Diana Slavu (Serghi) finds herself in Bucharest after the movements of the family during WWI, which include a spell in Braila, Romania and Sofia, Bulgaria where her family has relatives. But the fact that she is already there, in the mythological capital of so many Romanian interwar novels where Bucharest comes across as a city of pure wonder, but also of misery, e. g. Cezar Petrescu's *Calea Victoriei*, earns her the appellation "Miss" (*domnișoară*) (72), a term which she cherishes and which indicates a higher position in society for a young girl who is to become a lady, corresponding in its social semantics to the French *mademoiselle*. Serghi's presentation of Bucharest is mostly reportorial – through insightful contrasts and comparisons between stereotypes and lived experience: "Bucharest girls are more emancipated,' they would say, but it seemed to me, on the contrary, that here in the country they were freer, bolder" (72). The protagonist's emotions in the capital are subject to occurrences and events concerning the beloved grandparents: what happens in Constanța is reflected in Bucharest: "When I returned to Bucharest, the house appeared empty, desolate… My granny had died" (73). Serghi's Bucharest is topographical, with the possibility to trace the trajectories made by the city dweller, which is entirely in line with representations of this city by Rebreanu, Sebastian and Petrescu. In that she stays close to the early modernist tradition in Europe and across the Atlantic. Serghi's portrayal of Bucharest is similar to that of Edith Wharton's New York from *The House of Mirth*. The perspective

is often from inside out and just like in Wharton's novel we can trace the evolution of the houses. While Lily Bart moves from riches to rags, with Diana Slavu, the movement is from very poor housing where she lives with her family – mother, father, and sister, to a room to herself in a recollection of Virginia Woolf's famous essay "A Room of One's Own" from 1928 and again as in Wharton's novel, these houses are very important, to the point that, not having a dowry, she marries the first man that takes her without requiring this of her.

Bucharest is often revealed through another kind of comparison – Diana's recognizability on the city streets after she has exposed herself to the hot Constanța sun and has bronzed up (120). The first-person perspective, as in Plath's novel, offers the possibility to see the city through the eyes of a woman, who just like Esther (Plath) is poor and white, but who is not living in the multicolored multi-ethnic metropolis with the massive immigration from both inside and outside the country. Bucharest had its own immigration from other parts of Romania and from Bessarabia (Moldova), but, naturally, on a much smaller scale by comparison. Another point of comparison to Constanța is the *ștrand* (*strand*) Kiseleff – a swimming pool contrasted to the infinity of the sea (121). Of great significance in the novel is the mythological cafeteria Capșa, today also a hotel, on the legendary boulevard Calea Victoriei, which, like Corso, or Café de la Paix, in other Romanian novels between the war, becomes a place of identification and dissociation, at the same time, with the world of the rich. For the teenage Diana Slavu, it becomes a place of reveries and identification, like the skyscrapers from Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, and where she is invited by an admirer of both her mother and herself, Cobadin. In one of the most revealing scenes from the novel she has to make a very important decision which will predetermine the way her life will unfold. When with her mother, she has been used to ordering only the cheapest items on the menu, so she is reluctant to order for fear of showing her humble preferences. Cobadin makes an order for her and so she gets an assortment of tempting sweet delicacies. Unlike Esther, who seems to enjoy the luncheons she is offered by the magazine and who chooses on purpose the most expensive items on the menu (*BJ* 25), Diana is painfully aware that for her one-off feast there is a heavy price to pay, and it will have to do with restraining her

freedom of choice – the poisoned lunch in *The Bell Jar*. Still, Cobadin tells her things that sound terrible to an innocent girl in her sweet sixteen, but they turn out prophetic for Diana: "Mark my words, if you don't make a serious compromise in life, especially in the beginning, a single but a good one, you end up making a hundred, a thousand…" (152). Diana (Serghi) will always be haunted by the suspicion that men want to take an advantage of the fact that she is poor and so will want to be with her knowing fully well that she is not in the position to refuse, but she keeps denying them in a frantic attempt to he herself. Esther (Plath) has a similar complex, but she refuses to accept hypocrisy, and believes she should meet a godlike figure, not the underachievers in manliness she encounters at Smith College. It can be said with certainty that Esther (Plath) would never have accepted a boring self-absorbed prick like Michi – the man that Diana (Serghi) marries. She would probably have found Alex (Camil Petrescu) – the man who becomes Serghi's heroine's lover interesting because he seems to be knowledgeable about literature and she also might have considered him for a lover, certainly not for a husband for lacking godliness in the big city.

Being surrounded by friends at almost all times, in her descent into depression Diana is alone in a Bucharest room which looks a bit better than the miserable small apartments she has occupied with her parents and later with her husband. It should be noted that this state is similar to the situation Plath found herself in after being abandoned by Ted Hughes, but in the retrospective account from *The Bell Jar* Esther does not reach it for the simple reason that she is not married. It has been said that Plath burned certain manuscripts together with some stuff belonging to Hughes, one of the items possibly being an unfinished novel of hers, a sequel to *The Bell Jar* where she presumably pointed out the salvation for her depressive protagonist – a happy marriage to a loving husband. Unfortunately, Plath was bitterly disappointed in that, and being confessionally truthful, she might have destroyed what she saw as unfounded optimism in life, respectively in a novel.

At the end of *The Spider's Web*, Diana is in Bucharest in her room, all alone, and here we have some of the best modernist depictions of the city related to the protagonist's perspective of reordering her life,

which also gives some motor functions to streets, houses, furniture, and people through the prism of ticking time:

> The clock makes the same sound with each second that passes. The sky is all light, transparent as a lake, the whitish clouds in the shape of streaks, like the rippling of quiet waters on a windy day. The sun is now over a house, now covered by a house corner, which seems to have cut a slice from it. The houses in the background are profiled against the backdrop of reddish fumes. The blueness of the sky is streaked everywhere by red lines. The lines have merged now. The sky is like some cloth that is changing colors incessantly. From the background, towards me, loom larger the roofs and fragments of houses, with just a window, with more windows, here with a green wall, the other one – with red, most of them – with gray. The ones in the back, as if made of smoke, assume texture as they come towards me; their roofs are of bluish snow under the twilight which is coming down… (397).

Serghi's Bucharest becomes modernist in the play with colors, forms, and shapes at the end of the novel, but before that point it is just an urban environment without any meaningful modernist transformations as we have with Plath or Dos Passos. The important buildings on Calea Victoriei are still mythological and have their social role in experiencing the Romanian capital as is the case with Capșa or Ateneu – the place where the mysterious painter Petre Barbu is supposed to present his paintings, or the Cișmigiu Gardens – a magical place for reading French poetry. Not so with Balchik, the fairy-tale place of Diana's falling in love with the mysterious Alex Dobrescu/ Petre Barbu and where the author's flair for modernist depictions provides undoubtedly the best there are to date of this Black Sea town. Balchik is a locus of the magical unknown where Diana is in a new role – that of the brief visitor and her "disclosive happenings of belonging" reveal her as someone who wants to see and experience as much as it is possible of the town[58]. Despite its overall gray depressive colors, Bucharest emerges as a city where one learns to be honest and live on one's own, thus becoming a necessary experience for a young Romanian woman where Diana will be able to say that she is finally through with "the toxins of Mangalia and the unsettling charm of

[58] See Boev, Hristo. *The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars* (87-128). – a. n.

Balchik" (391). A place of self-quest and self-awareness for both Esther and Diana, the big city – New York and Bucharest – is dark and inscrutable, gray, and depressing, respectively.

4. Girls and city culture: New York vs Bucharest against First and Second Wave Feminism – plurality of the self and antipatriarchality

Arguably feminism in the 1920s and 1950s had its strongest manifestations in urban environments and that meant the big cities where one had to prove oneself regardless of the sex and where gender allowances were quick to lose their patriarchal meanings in the race for better paid jobs. As Dos Passos was to note remarkably in the opening lines of *The 42nd Parallel*: "One bed is not enough, one job is not enough, one life is not enough. At night, head swimming with wants, he walks by himself alone. No job, no woman, no house, no city" (v-vi)[59]. *This* is so because they became the melting pots where cultures blended and where gender roles were challenged but even today some vestiges of patriarchality survive inside such urban spaces to be found in close-knit communities. In the endless vortex of trying to fit in and at the same time, remain who they are, women have had to prove themselves fully capable of being equal to men in every way possible. There are certain aspects of the feminist engagement in both Serghi and Plath that are common, but there are also considerable differences which correspond to what has come to be known as First- and Second-wave feminism.

4.1. Romania and First Wave Feminism

One of the main concerns for the First Wave, which in Europe took place in the 1920s, was the right to vote. In Romania, this right was granted to women at the age of 30 and above who had a certain degree of literacy, but it did not become a reality until 1938 under the rule of Carol II. The restrictive age of 30 was reduced in the first communist Constitution in 1948 to 18 while those who could be elected had to be at least 23 years of age. In the epoch between the wars, women occupied modest positions in the public administration even if they were qualified and had the necessary higher education studies

[59] Also discussed in *Modern(ist) Potrayals of the City in Dickens and Dos Passos* (137). – a. n.

(Dulămiță Ionuț and Ionuț Sociu)[60]. Another problem was the widespread conviction that girls were supposed to be prepared for their "major role" in life – wifehood and motherhood. Although legislative base for hiring women at qualified job positions there was (the 1929 law for the work contracts and the removal of the civil incapacitation of married women through Decree 1412 as of 20 April 1932), the actual occupation of these positions by women was problematic due to prejudice and patriarchal stereotypes. Among the best-known figures in the feminist movement for granting full political rights to women were the following: Calypso Botez, Alexandrina Cantacuzino, Eleonora Stratilescu, Elena Maissner and Maria Bușureanu. Stratilescu synthesizes the main points thus: economically, the equal payment for equal work; the protection of the work done by women and its results; the combating of children's mortality in poor families; culturally, access to all the forms of work preparation and all types of career, as well as to all the hierarchical steps, resolving the conflict career – maternity; mixed education, equal values and conditions indifferent of the sex; in marriage – equality between spouses by law and education, the control over material resources regardless of the sex; a part of the income of the husband to come to the woman for her work at home, the elimination of the double moral standard, the reformation of the legal marriage through the dissolution of the matrimonial authorities; politically – equal civil and political rights, women's participation in all the institutions, positions and public functions; women's political preparations for exercising their rights.

4.2. Two cities, two epochs, two girls; Second Wave Feminism in the USA

As stated above, the demands of Romanian feminists from the 1920s and 1930s roughly coincided with those from the First Wave of Feminism in the West. Even though men would willingly acknowledge women's superiority in the home affairs and private life, women remained politically inferior being excluded from public life. Naturally, not all women felt equally strongly about all these demands but in *The Spider's Web*, from her lived experience, Serghi addresses some of

[60] See the article "80 de ani de când femeile pot vota în România," https://www.scena9.ro/article/votul-femeilor-in-romania-cronica-unei-lupte. – a. n.

them particularly poignantly. In the first place, this is the perceived role of the woman as a housewife and her entire preparation for it rather than the equal opportunities to school and work. There are numerous passages in the novel where Diana Slavu has to endure her father's effusions about her continuing her school studies and his incurring expenses. Not having read a single book and not having finished even the 1st grade of primary school, her father, although loving his daughter with passion, is unable to understand Diana's perceived obsession with studying and reading. For example, seeing Diana read Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, one of Plath's favorites as well, he barges into her room, rips the book out of her hands and tears it to shreds, crying that he will not tolerate any crimes in his house (37). Not on a single occasion does he threaten with rage to stop paying for Diana's school and university education since his conviction is that studying has not brought any good to a single girl and he does not want his girl to be "a philosopher or a doctor" (98). Serghi's feminism includes protesting against the unequal job opportunities girls have after finishing their higher education. Diana obtains her barrister's diploma but while doing her mandatory practice, she finds that trainees are not paid simply because the practice is *mandatory,* and they will have to do it with whoever lawyer takes them. Being a girl results in additional encumbrances – she is too beautiful to be taken by a lawyer for this practice since the lawyer's wife would remonstrate: "we don't need a skirt" (163), and besides, they are all men in confirmation to the abovementioned practices where men occupied socially important positions. The untenability for the profession for her and for anyone else in the epoque is expressed by Cobadin in the seminal scene from Capșa: "So, you're gonna be a lawyer… To defend who? See, the rich have enough defenders, and they don't even need them… The poor, they can be defended by no one" (150). Living in Bucharest, especially in the winter, was hard enough and with no income at all women were heavily dependent on their husbands who also suffered hardships providing for their families, but the women, even with their best intentions, had no way of contributing substantially: "Sometimes I would be overcome with despondency. I wanted to go back, stay in the kitchen next to the stove so I could warm up my feet, and then look for a job, any other job. I wanted nothing else anymore but to work

somewhere warm" (164). All she can obtain in terms of a job, and only after a famous editor takes pity on her, is the position of a drama chronicler.

In the patriarchal Bucharest from Serghi's novel, all that is expected of Diana is to be beautiful, modest, appreciative of men's humor, and healthy enough to be able to bear them a child, which she is, and so she reaps the benefits of these in men's admiration in overt or covert marriage proposals. Things, however, are not what they seem since Diana also needs to have a dowry without which not even a shoemaker would take her for a wife; in fact, there is only one who is willing to do so in Constanța and Diana's refusing his advances leaves her mother consternated (145). While she tries to look her amazing best at all times, wearing the most fashionable women's clothes but tailormade from cheaper materials so that the fashion is there, if not the quality, Diana starts wearing a mask reflected in her behavior as well – always smiling, laughing, looking carefree and nonchalant while actually living in conditions impossible to imagine which leave everyone dismayed and confused once they get to see them, and very few of them do – her true friends. Being the only one who is actively feminine (76) even though her mother is only thirty-five years of age, and for purely marrying reasons, Diana is actively involved in the city culture the 1920s Bucharest can offer – going to the cinema, reading French poetry, going to dances, wearing the fashionable clothes, enjoying men's compliments on her beauty and style, accepting declarations of love through which she can read men's unawareness of her actual financial state; therefore, she reads their appreciating her as a seemingly expensive commodity. In that, again, she is in a situation which was very much valid for the US 1890s, as exemplified in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* through Lily Bart's marital misfortunes in New York and Edna Pontellier's conjugal disappointments and amorous ordeals in New Orleans from Chopin's *The Awakening*. Both American novels point out the extremity of women's plight through the suicides of the main protagonists. Dos Passos, in his portrayal of Ellen in New York from *Manhattan Transfer*, presents her both as a men's commodity and as an avid consumer of commodities herself, leaving her very little humanity, thus denying her this extreme gest. What makes Diana's situation unbearable is the complicity and complacence

of everyone around her, including her family and friends, who are becoming yet another layer of the spider's web against which and in which she is flailing desperately, trying to break free.

The painful realization that appearances could not be further from the truth, combined with a sensation of men's being hypocritical, an acceptance based on false premises, is what stops her from acting upon any of these proposals. There is, of course, the sensation that she is being hypocritical herself trying to pass herself off for what she is not. And this heavily constraining patriarchal frame of the 1920s is what makes Diana feel as if she were in a spider's web where the carnivorous spider, life, is gloating over her terrible predicament. In her *Memories* (1977), Serghi was to recall saying with bitterness while answering the exam question: *Who is incapable of exercising civil rights?* "The minor, the mad person and the married woman" (151).

While First Wave Feminism was concerned mainly with suffrage and inequality in job opportunities, both strongly reflected in *The Spider's Web*, Second Wave Feminism broadened the scope for the demands. It took place between 1960 and 1980 and its major slogan was "The Personal is Political". Women were asked to answer the question how their lives were affected by sexist power structures. The demands from the Second Wave in the USA arose from the baby boom from the late 1940s through the 1950s and 1960s and insisted on resolving women's reproductive rights, especially what concerned the right to legal abortion. Another major achievement to that effect was the FDA approval of the combined oral contraceptive pill. If this situation had been resolved in the 1920s, the American tragedy from Dreiser's eponymous novel could certainly have been prevented, but as it was based on a true story, the murder of Grace Brown from 1906 would also have been foiled[61].

The 1950s insistence on domesticity and the allocated role of the woman as the housewife was a certain return to the Victorian Era which

61 While Dreiser was more concerned with representing the American Dream of the 1920s from the perspective of the undereducated but good-looking boy (Clyde Griffiths), exposing the untenability of success through hard work, a more feminist book dealing with the event appeared in 2003, *A Northern Light* by Jennifer Donnelly. – a. n.

also left other problems from the 1920s unsolved. The demand for equal job opportunities for men and women from the First Feminist Wave did bring the necessary legislative changes but it never truly resolved the actual situation of men's perceived superiority as regards leadership positions. Plath's attack on this social arrangement is consistent and unrelenting. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther faces time and time again the harsh reality of having the only option of becoming a secretary, if she cannot obtain a teaching position, and that only if she masters shorthand, which she does not (*BJ* 41). She concludes with bitterness: "This meant I couldn't get a good job after college. My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand was something else again" (*BJ* 79). Plath, however, cannot put up with such a demeaning job as the only permanent occupation for a girl: "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters" (*BJ* 79). Eventually, Esther is persuaded to take a shorthand course with her mother, but she decides to use this a pretext for not working a summer job (*BJ* 128). Since Plath (Esther) relates shorthand only to finding a job in America, this compliance with the patriarchal rules becomes a necessity in case she does not find a lover in Europe (*BJ* 129). She realizes that if she were to marry, she would take the other permanent job society has prepared for her – that of the housewife in which case she would not be needing the shorthand skills (*BJ* 129). Still, unmastered shorthand and unmarried leaves Esther (Plath) in dire straits: "But I didn't know shorthand, so what could I do? I could be a waitress or a typist" (*BJ* 132). On another occasion, Buddy Willard's mother seems to partake of the patriarchal complot against Esther: "Buddy's mother had even arranged for me to be given a job as a waitress at the TB sanatorium that summer so Buddy wouldn't be lonely" (*BJ* 20).

Accepting the role of the housewife is not something that Esther (Plath) looks forward to, although when she does get married, Plath, being an overachiever, decides she should excel at that as well. The everlasting sad example Esther refers to has to do with Buddy Willard's mother and she is portrayed as the epitome of servile housewifery, very far from the carefree state of Selden's "republic of the spirit" (Wharton 108), where he defines success in the following manner: "[Freedom] from everything – from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety,

from all the material accidents" (108). Obviously, this "success" is as unattainable for Lily Bart in 1905 New York as it is for Diana Slavu in 1920s Bucharest or Esther Greenwood in 1950s New York. It is the eternal woman's predetermination that decides that women are to have families, children and be housewives. The equality in the division of the household chores was not a strong preoccupation with Second Wave Feminism perhaps due to the realization that it could not result in tangible gender role changes. There were influential studies on the subject, though. Thus, in the wake of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* which treats feminine *otherness* and *agency*, in 1963 appeared Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* which objects to women's portrayal in mainstream media where they are subscribed to the position of the housewife which, in turn, deprives them of realizing their professional potential for other socially important roles. This writer explores the housewife's state of permanent restlessness, anxiety, and sadness in accepting housewifery as the only viable post-marital professional option for a woman.

Plath's insistence, therefore, on exposing the slavery and complicity in the role women had as wives, regardless of the intellectual advancement of the husband, poses a strong claim for Plath as a prominent feminist: "I detected the vocabulary of Mrs Willard and my heart sank. Mrs Willard always invited you for a bite to eat" (*BJ* 53). She sees this as a trap for unmarried women where they are lured with claims to corporeal consumption aiming to create in them a sense of dependence and obligation which would force them to accept the boy as a husband. Mrs Willard's complicity extends to demanding that girls be virgins before marriage: "I knew Mrs Willard was a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both. When I first went to her house for supper she gave me a queer, shrewd, searching look, and I knew she was trying to tell whether I was a virgin or not" (*BJ* 74), similar to the probing look Diana endures at Michi's family house (182). She also defines the boundaries of marital expectations in men and women: "What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security" (*BJ* 74). Should a woman settle for security? The answer to this question must be in the negative. However, this is what Diana initially values in her husband Michi (Tomi Ioanescu) and this is what she continues to value in him when all marriage illusions are shattered

to pieces, but she finally goes for yet another illusion – the possible satisfying relationship with Alex Dobrescu which is to be preferred to the certainty of "infinite security". Esther (Plath) is to say with conviction: "I would catch sight of some flawless man off in the distance, but as soon as he moved closer I immediately saw he wouldn't do at all. That's one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security" (*BJ* 87). Despite Plath's affirmation through Esther that she should be the sole mistress of all her actions, that is just an illusion that an unmarried girl can have. When married, Plath succumbs to many of the housewife routines she protests against, knowing too well that once married, she will have to stoop only with the vague probability to conquer.

Esther (Plath) has no illusions about what a marriage holds for a woman: "And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs Willard's kitchen mat" (*BJ* 89). The prospective marriage is for Esther (Plath) a form of consensual slavery: "I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (*BJ* 89). Esther's reflections on marriage are in fact Plath's post-marital conclusions. In 1963 when *The Bell Jar* was published Plath had been married for 7 years, was separated from her husband, and was about to commit suicide, only weeks after her novel had seen print. Plath's thoughts on marriage are resonant with Serghi's in *The Spider's Web* and are certainly close to the ideas behind Edna Pontellier's suicide from Chopin's *The Awakening*, both Serghi and Chopin seeing it as a form of female imprisonment.

Understanding only too well the full purport of the free restaurant dinners, Esther indulges in them when provided by *Mademoiselle* magazine with the realization that the *totalitarian state* of her acceptance of the free gifts, dinners, luncheons and other forms of courtship, is nothing but her consent to be the wooed subject of that state and that will be only temporary after which she will be back to her

depression staring at the grim prospect of a lifelong imprisonment in marriage. While both Diana and Esther enjoy the full range of feminine commodities available in the 1920s and 1950s, respectively, Esther is much freer in her choices, while Diana, although defiant before unsavory marriage proposals, understands well enough that resistance is useless and will have to surrender to that man who is willing to take her as a wife without a dowry.

4.3. The big city and the plurality of the feminine self.

In their identification with the big city Diana and Esther play different roles. Diana tries to be the girl from Bucharest because that qualifies her as a "miss" while Esther is there for a short period of time so she can be whoever she wants to. Since there is no way she can pass off as a New Yorker, being so glaringly provincial, Esther does not even try after she miserably fails to behave adequately with taxi drivers and bellboys. Her misadventures continue in bars where she pretends she has some alcohol culture and orders straight vodka to the bartender's amazement: "I'll have vodka,' I said. The man looked at me more closely. 'With anything?' 'Just plain,' I said. 'I always have it plain" (*BJ* 11). So, she confesses that she has desired to love this modern culture: "My dream was some day ordering a drink and finding out it tasted wonderful" (*BJ* 11). The experience of drinking alcohol, however, feels empowering and initiating: "I began to think vodka was my drink at last. It didn't taste like anything, but it went straight down into my stomach like a sword-swallower's sword and made me feel powerful and god-like" (*BJ* 13). Being part of the youth culture of the decade creates a sense of belonging in Esther and reflects Plath's desire to be an all-American girl. She would rather be associated with another big city, Chicago, not Boston which she connects with her magical childhood but where everyone knows everyone else. As a result, she comes up with her alter ego for New York: "My name's Elly Higginbottom,' I said. 'I come from Chicago.' After that I felt safer. I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston" (*BJ* 12). Comically enough, Esther occasionally forgets that she is supposed to be Elly so when they knock on her hotel door looking for her, but asking for Elly, she does not recognize who is being looked for (*BJ* 22). The sensation of duality in the big city is enhanced by an inner voice that keeps hissing

her name "as if I [she] had a split personality or something" (*BJ* 22). The name she connects with her often defiant but also humiliated self from obscure New York bars and apartments, and which has made her feel liberated in New York comes in handy yet again when she has already descended into depression and is loitering near the Boston harbor where she is accosted by a sailor (*BJ* 139). This antipode of the super-ambitious overachiever is a surprisingly honest self which allows her to envision a much simpler life spent with common people without pretense to any higher ambitions in life. The prospect is refreshingly attractive where one finds joy in the little things and where she connects to a strong melodramatic but also uplifting literary tradition – *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *Les Misérables*, *Notre Dame de Paris*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Anne of Green Gables:* "I would be simple Elly Higginbottom, the orphan. People would love me for my sweet, quiet nature. They wouldn't be after me to read books and write long papers on the twins in James Joyce. And one day I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway" (*BJ* 140). The comparison to the woman with her swelling family of many children is not accidental and shows Plath's ambiguous attitude towards such simplicities in life. On one hand, she is revolted by their animalistic primitive nature connecting a woman to her Biblical reproductive function. On the other hand, she feels she cannot escape this part of human nature, regardless of the heights she may reach, writing poetry, articles and even novels. Her alter ego is, therefore, her complete opposite but one can pity her for reaching it only when she becomes clinically depressed, possibly a bitter realization that marriage could have been happier had she not become Ted Hughes's wife, had she opted for a more down-to-earth man who was not the leading poet of England but had other merits, and they would have sufficed. The feminine self in *The Bell Jar* receives yet another dimension in a fiction within the autofiction, a transmutation of the dominant self – Esther decides to write a novel and her protagonist is called Elaine, but that would be herself: "My heroine would be myself, only in disguise" (*BJ* 126).

Unlike Plath (Esther), Serghi (Diana) felt she had to keep appearances to the last moment since her living conditions were humanly unacceptable, that is, if one were not spiritual enough as Henry

Miller who, from *The Tropic of Cancer* set in Paris, declares in the opening lines: "I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive"[62] (3). Diana can never make such a candid declaration in Bucharest of the 1920s or anywhere else for that matter. Neither could Esther, were she in her shoes. The two women in writing who come close are Emily Dickinson and Anne Sexton, but this was an impossibility for both Plath and Serghi. Consequently, Diana leaves the impression that she comes from a well-off family, but she is still honest enough to invite her future husband, Michi, to her strikingly basic abode in the big city. For starters, regardless of where she is, she lets the others say whatever they want of her, thus becoming a sort of an urban legend through hearsay: "I found it strange, but also very interesting that no one seemed to know anything precise about her family. Everyone said: 'I have heard that…' 'I have heard that her parents are Serbs…' 'Oh, no, her father is Bulgarian.' 'Impossible! Perhaps Russians.' 'I have heard that her mother is Russian" (20). Being of mixed identity – Romanian and Bulgarian, Serghi (Diana) neither dispels, nor confirms these rumors. Multiethnic Romania in the 1920s and the 1930s was a country with a vast territory, incorporating Southern Dobruja and Bessarabia, as well as parts of the Ukrainian coastal area comprising a territory of almost 300 000 square kilometers and a population commensurate with its present numbers[63]. Diana's (Serghi's) mixed identity is more problematic compared to Esther's (Plath's) entirely Germanic origin (*BJ* 34). While ultimately it *does* leave Plath with the dilemma whether she should be a fascist or a Jew, which results in her ultimate striking identification with the Jewish woman who adores a fascist (*CP* 223), Diana is nowhere eager to disclose her Bulgarian origins. Bulgarians were not in fashion in the Romania of those years – the denigrating press from before and during WWI[64] had played out its role. So, Diana while regretting the fact that she only barely understands very basic Bulgarian (41), also has to suffer the consequences for being considered Bulgarian and not speak the language (46). As a result, when she moves to live in Balchik, where there is a massive Bulgarian population, Diana chooses not to connect to people from her origin

[62] Also analyzed in *The Different Dobruja between the Wars* (213). – a. n.
[63] See *The Different Dobruja* (63). – n. a.
[64] Ibid, 65-71. – n. a.

through her father and keeps her contacts to the Turks who provide her and Alex Dobrescu with boating services. Again, this is in stark contrast with Esther's (Plath's) desire to reconnect with her roots and learn German (*BJ* 34-5) and not mastering the language is perceived as a deficiency by both herself and the chief editor of *Mademoiselle* (*BJ* 35, 81, 129).

Being compelled to keep this mixed origin a public secret turns Diana into an enigma for the others and when confronted with it in Bucharest, she can only summon up a very brief presentation of her family where they are revealed as "honest people" from humble origin (183). While Plath's German origins are a potential for mastering yet another European language, other than French, Serghi's Bulgarian ones remain something that she is not particularly proud of and sees no reason to brag about it. Naturally, this behavior on part of Diana underscores her conviction that she will be accepted more easily in the Romanian society where she ardently desires to belong. Her choices of husband and lover are invariably connected to Romanian men. The other men who like her are also Romanians. There is never in her the secret desire to have a relationship with a boy or a man from other origins (except when she is a very small girl of six) unlike Plath who professes her craving for a European lover, a boy from Russia as a husband – in her *Journals* and *The Bell Jar* and her acting upon it which resulted in her marriage to Ted Hughes from England. In that, Serghi also differed from Dubarova who, just like Plath, had the predilection for a blond boy, in the Bulgarian poet's case, from Sweden.

Being from Germanic origin was never a problem for Plath as far as blending in American society was concerned, unlike Serghi who would increase her chances by not mentioning her mixed origin to others under any circumstances. This identity inferiority complex leaves Diana with a double coverup – of her origin and of her poverty which, in her case, are related. It should be noted that Diana never expresses any love for Bulgaria as a country although she spends time in Sofia with her Bulgarian cousins and finds them beautiful. Her stay in Balchik is portrayed entirely from the perspective of a Romanian unhappily married woman who seeks a Romanian lover and her Balchik is often in tune with other Romanian depictions of the town as the pearl of the crown of the Romanian empire. Her father identifies with his

Bulgarian origin when WWI is announced and Romania's alliance against the country of his origins provokes rage in him, but that only results in Diana's comment that her father is right (57). It would be incorrect to presume, however, that Diana could not have behaved differently – she might have been more outspoken about her origins and lack of dowry and perhaps she would have found a better marriage party. In her case, just like in Plath's, the overt insistence on a certain (different) fix idea results in a misfortune. All these considerations, however, create a mask that Diana always wears. Thus, she comes out as shallow, coquette, light-headed and very few are those who know her for what she is – the readers know her from her notes which constitute a parallel version of herself. This supercilious feminine self that she flaunts – of the nonchalant Romanian coquette, is nothing but her painful desire to come out as an all-Romanian girl who shocks the reader by her first stark revelation about herself from her notebooks – that she had a sad childhood without any toys (34). Consequently, all her life seems to the ones who have seen her but a childish game in which she refuses to take anyone or anything seriously underneath which, we, the readers know, that this frivolous feminine self is the price a very serious girl with mixed identity pays for trying to blend in.

It is interesting to note that the alter egos both heroines construct for themselves are totally different even though they are both white and poor. It is through reading *The Spider's Web*, however, that we see poverty as a vice. Although Diana is eventually able to overcome this issue, it marks her youth and is at the core of the mismarriage she makes. With Plath the tendency is in the opposite direction – to link herself to this realization and act accordingly, thus humble and simplify herself to a potentially more rewarding life as a woman. What Esther cannot do, however, Diana can, and in the end, she is happy to drop all pretenses and be her daddy's girl, thus accepting both her innate poverty and complex identity.

In the modern novels both writers wrote, Serghi and Plath, we have time extended over a period of about 17 years with the Romanian writer, and compressed into one summer – that of 1953, with the American one. This technique has allowed Serghi to write a *bildungsroman* (novel of development) and her feminine selves evolve over this period of time – from the little girl who plays without any toys,

to the daughter taking care of her sick father, the adolescent girl who has to pretend she is well off and her final transformation – that of the depressed wife who has an affair compatible with that of Graham Green's Sarah and Bendrix from *The End of the Affair*, without the magnanimous philosophical stance of Sarah's husband, Henry Miles. As a result, although not having had to reinvent herself into so many alter egos, in her novel Serghi produces feminine selves that are more transformative than Plath's and can be compared to the overall transformations Plath's feminine selves undergo from her entire opera – the *novel*, *letters*, *journals*, *poems* and *short stories*.

5. Sexuality in *The Bell Jar* vs *The Spider's Web*: 1950s USA vs 1920s/1930s Romania

In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault speaks of "the injunction to silence, the affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (4) referring to the hypocritical practices of silence on sexual matters in Victorian times in both oral and written discourse. With the advent of Modernism, however, and the publication and translations of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* the awkward moments of hinted sexuality in mainstream literature were brought to an end. Quite simultaneously both in English and American literature, as well as in the Romanian novels of the 1930s, its literary expression allowed a more open discussion and portrayal of sexual matters. Undoubtedly, the beats of the 1950s and the hippies of the 1960s with their sexual revolution made this a much easier and even pleasurable subject to stomach. English literature, however, did not see many staunch followers of D. H. Lawrence: Virginia Woolf is notoriously known to have used the word *semen* in public once, but this was not reflected in her writings. American literature though had its fair share of candid writers who gave rise to the so-called "natural novel", especially through names such as Henry Miller and Charles Bukowski with whom sexual scenes were abundant and explicit but well incorporated into the existentialism of their works. Anne Sexton was also quite outspoken about female sexuality openly discussing menstruation and masturbation, thus adding two more "unacceptable" topics to her poems, apart from "the hospital". In Romanian literature, the 1930s gave birth to a plethora of Romanian novels, no fewer than

30 classics, where Victorianist prudery was irrevocably ousted by the sensual modernism of both men and women writers and where the romantic Eminesque imagery of men's and women's mouths and hands, the tools of predatory male behavior, as shown in the poem "Desire" (Dorință), remained oddly antiquated only in Ibrăileanu's *Adela*. Writers such as Gib Mihăescu introduced voyeurism of strongly suggestive sexual scenes in his *The Russian Woman* (*Rusoaica*) and together with Mihail Sebastian, Liviu Rebreanu and Anton Holban[65], gave a large play to female erotic anatomy in his works while the male included everything but the phallus; for both the male and the female organs appropriate stylized euphemisms were used. Of course, as Foucault states it, earlier times enjoyed a much higher freedom: "at the beginning of the seventeenth century a certain frankness was still common" (3). And he elaborates: "Sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit. Codes regulating the coarse, the obscene, and the indecent were quite lax compared to those of the nineteenth century" (3). Indeed, it would be enough to recall the literature of the Renaissance – the *carpe diem* theme traversing the works of Andrew Marvell and Shakespeare. Even today's readers would be shocked by the natural sexual playfulness of the opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, where the servants indulge in all sorts of sexual puns including rape or Mercutio's adept reference to Juliet's and Romeo's sexual organs as "medlar" and "pop'rin pear", respectively (Shakespeare 205), with Romeo hiding in a garden. Even more shocking may seem Shakespeare's imaginative depiction of human genitalia in his pun on "will" from Sonnet 135 (385). While Defoe's comic sexual euphemisms in *Moll Flanders* can bring a smile to a contemporary reader, and Dickens's Victorian discussion of shapes and forms concerning Agnes for the male gaze in *David Copperfield*, even undiluted sympathy with the sexually encumbered narrator, a trip back to the 14th century will offer a palpable sensation of early Modernity and direct expression. We can see this in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*,

[65] For a more detailed discussion of Romanian literature, see Boev, Hristo. *The Different Dobruja between the Wars* (73-82). – a. n.

especially "The Miller's Tale" – in Nicholas's sexual advances on Allison where the female sexual organ is directly named with a word which today is considered extremely vulgar and would be perceived as an unforgivable offense to any woman, the naming, consequently, bound to bring another sense of awkwardness in a reader or a classroom discussion where the Middle Ages are being studied.

5.1. The aesthetics of male predation and the case of feminine chastity: the Romanian and the American experience

Emerging from the 19th century, the American and Romanian novels in the 1920s and 1930s were concerned not only with what could be said but also with what was done and how it was done. There is a striking transatlantic similarity in the treatment of female virginity and unwanted pregnancy, for instance, in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925) where Roberta demands of Clyde that he marry her so that she can give birth to a child and then he can divorce her, thus desiring to preserve her decency. We have the exact same motif in Mihail Drumeș's *Invitation to Waltz* (*Invitația la vals*) (1936) where Mihaela's sister pleads with Tudor, the narrator of the story, to marry the girl he has impregnated so she can have a child being married and then he can divorce her, if he so desires. This insistence on female chastity and virtue, which could only be rewarded in Richardson's *Pamela*, is shown time and again to be ridiculous by both the American and Romanian writers. As an extreme case of such ridiculousness inscribed into the tragic framework of a novel such as Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (*Crónica de una muerte anunciada*) (1981), we have Rebreanu's *Embers* (*Jar*) (1934) where Liana is strikingly behind the modern times: she is not pregnant, which would be a total calamity, taking into consideration the fact that Dandu, the guy who she has had a relationship with, is a shameless multigamous rake, but she has lost her virginity to him and so she pleads with him to marry her and then, again, divorce her so she can hope, having lost her pristine virginal luster, to be married to another man with the official excuse for not being a virgin, stamped by a marriage certificate. As Dreiser's, Drumeș's and Rebreanu's novels unanimously protest, not only are such pleas absurd but, more importantly, whether acted upon or not, they have led to tragedies – the death of the girl in all three cases.

It should be mentioned that both Diana and Esther are in their very early 20s, strictly heterosexual and their *innate interest* in men may be found to contradict or corroborate Adrienne Rich's claims of *compulsory heterosexuality*, depending on the analyst. Not having a dowry, Diana has only this to offer to her husband Michi – her virginity, but she does not make much of it and we are left with the sensation that it could hardly be considered a fair trade for the missing dowry. Unlike Esther's lacking enthusiasm concerning male genitalia (*BJ* 71), Diana has higher expectations, not unmixed with fright, of her first night with a man – her husband, with, naturally, the anatomic details spared. His lack of experience, however, has a dampening effect on the girl's feverish expectations: "I became, in Bucharest, after so many other nights, Michi's woman, but without reaching the rejoicement I was craving, the sense of completion towards which I aspired. Michi seemed to be happy. Asleep. I was waiting, motionless, with the eyes wide open, for darkness to disperse, for another day to begin" (193). The next day, however, only confirms a tedious marital routine: "But with the passing of each day, I could see how before me were rising cold high walls. I felt like a convicted criminal who was trying, stupidly, to break the prison bars of the windows" (193). Lack of sexual satisfaction continues in her marriage, so Diana gradually realizes that the situation is irreparable on the level of the marriage itself. Here is the time to say that the practices of necking and making out are strongly present both in Serghi's novel and Plath's prose writings which qualifies them as part and parcel of girls' adolescent experiences with the only realization on part of the Romanian girls that they should save their chastity and offer their virginity to their future husbands on a silver platter on the first wedding night and that, by contrast, the husbands were not expected to do the same. What is more, they would be appreciated better by the brides if they had lost their virginity previously and had perfected the art of lovemaking on other girls as a necessary practice. Esther (Plath) has no such illusions or expectations and while she, just like Diana, necks, and pets mainly with her would-be husband, she, like Diana, repeatedly expresses her disappointment in the "uninspired kisses" (*BJ* 64) he gives her. In Diana's case her first kiss, with her future husband Michi, is described as a total disaster with him being overly clumsy and rough:

> Michi put his hands on my shoulders. I raised my head so I could see him better, to see how he was for real. But, just like when you are looking through a pair of binoculars, from the back of a spectacle hall, at the actors on the stage, I felt that he appeared to be both too far and too near. I noticed that he was reddening, as if he were being strangled by his collar. That on his large, neat forehead was bulging a vein, that his look hardened. I wished to back off, but his hands on my shoulders cramped and I felt on my lips his mouth like a suction cup. Frightened, I wanted to break loose from that wet mouth, which was trying expressly to pull my teeth out. I felt revolted, but at the same time, lucid and curious, I wanted to know if this hurried attempt to suck me ravenously could be called a kiss… I had been waiting for years for the first kiss. Could it be this insatiable suction, devoid of any magic, any poetry, the kiss I had been dreaming of for so long? About which quivering lips were prattling so much at school? 'This can't be happening!' I wanted to scream, 'No, this cannot be!' (158).

A parallel reading of the Romanian novels from the epoch written by men will show that there is a certain aesthetics of the male rough touch. The necking and foreplay in novels such as *The Accident, Embers, The Russian Woman, Donna Alba* and *Invitation to Waltz* invariably show women under physical strain from men's advances with a certain adaptation on part of the women who seem to welcome this approach as the relationship advances. Serghi's novel, however, affirms the perception that the Romanian men of the epoch may have been misled into believing that they were great lovers. Her verdict is shattering: "I was thinking about Michi. I had gotten used to his rushed embrace at night in the dark. I was unsatisfied, bewildered, even dismayed, but I had accepted those, they didn't hurt so much. When he fell asleep, I took a notebook, and wrote. His caring presence, full of admiration, gave me a sense of equilibrium, quietude, but, above all, of security" (206). It is this kind of security that Mrs Willard claims all women need, but Diana goes on to show that she can very well do without it even though it is not easy, so she starts an affair with Alex Dobrescu in the magical Balchik where she has numerous romantic moments, with them boating or sheltering from a storm in a courtyard shanty, and where she experiences her first real kiss. Even though Alex is occasionally rough himself, being an experienced lover, he employs a wide range of tenderness with her, always giving her the dose that she

needs to keep her eternally hooked. Eventually she cheats on her husband with Alex only to learn from Michi that he has already done it to her and that he is very sorry about it. By that moment, however, she can no longer tolerate his total lack of interest in her except for the lovemaking moments. She has also come to despise his atrocious pragmatism. Moreover, she has discovered that he is narrow-minded, easily convinced by others about things she has not done. Then she would accept him back if he agreed to return to her, but fortunately he does not and so she can shackle off Alex as well, discovering, quite unusually for a Romanian female literary character, the possibility of self-reliance and living alone, which is not the best of all possible circumstances, but is much to be preferred to living a life of incessant dissatisfaction and lies.

Unlike Diana, Esther has a big issue with her virginity. She sees no reason to offer it to her would-be husband, Buddy Willard, having learned that he has lost his, having slept with a waitress and then with a nurse at the TB sanatorium (*BJ* 64). There is no issue with the dowry, however, since with Esther, living in the 1950s USA, this was already largely a thing of the Victorian past. A real fighter for gender equality, Esther (Plath) is convinced that there should be no double standards in anything, especially in the matters of sexuality. When she puts the question to Buddy, he is startled by the arcane word she uses, but more by the fact that it applies to him:

> Well, have you?' 'What do you mean, an *affair* [emphasis given]?' Buddy asked then in a hollow voice. 'You know, have you ever gone to bed with anyone?' […] 'Well, yes, I have,' Buddy said finally. I almost fell over. From the first night Buddy Willard kissed me and said I must go out with a lot of boys, he made me feel I was much more sexy and experienced […] Now I saw he had only been pretending all this time to be so innocent (*BJ* 72).

Deciding to get even with him, Esther plans on sleeping around with as many boys as it takes to equal the number of times Buddy has done it with girls, but she finds the resulting number staggering: "At first I thought he must have slept with the waitress only the once, but when I asked him how many times, just to make sure, he said he couldn't remember but a couple of times a week for the rest of the summer. I multiplied three by ten and got thirty, which seemed beyond

all reason" (*BJ* 73). Having discovered Buddy's hypocrisy, which, coincidentally Diana also discovers in one of her beaus, another medical student (Bob) who necks with another girl (a far cry from sleeping around), Esther perceives her virginity as a burden and then getting rid of it certainly excludes the assistance of the would-be husband. We have a definite break with all old sexual mores and perceptions. Her hope that this would happen with someone she likes – Constantin, the UN translator about whom she fantasizes that she is engaged to be married, is just a continuation of Plath's childhood dream about the Russian boy, love born out of the Cold War. Again, just like the warming of the relationship between the USA and USSR which is but an illusion, her hope is broken with Constantin lying next to her and doing nothing against the dark heart of New York (*BJ* 117). With all romantic illusions about her virginity torn to shreds, Esther is finally reduced to the prosaic getting rid of it with someone, anyone whom she can trust just a little: "Ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a millstone around my neck" (*BJ* 240). One of these prospective deflowerers is called Eric who has an animalistic understanding of the sexual act and the trouble with him is that she likes him, and this is reciprocated, but he refuses to see Esther as an animal: "It had crossed my mind at the time that Eric might be a good person to go to bed with […] But then Eric wrote me a letter saying he thought he might really be able to love me, I was so intelligent and cynical and yet had such a kind face, surprisingly like his older sister's, so I knew it was no use" (*BJ* 83).

Eventually, already deeply depressed, she does it with someone called Irwin and it is a technical job without any romanticism in it, but some "bad pain" (*BJ* 241). The deflowering results in a profuse hemorrhage which is heavily symbolic of the plight of all earthly women the way they were condemned by God for their thirst for knowledge, it could be seen as the passions of some female Jesus Christ, a Jessica Christina, who takes upon herself all congenital female suffering and bleeds for all the women in the world. It is also symbolic of a new life that Esther begins, a double rebirth, once from her suicide attempt and twice from sacrificing herself in the ritualistic impaling of the sexual act. All the other near sexual encounters of Esther's border on rape and the men are as rough with her as are the Romanian men

with the girls they have romantic notions about. By contrast, Buddy, despite being a confirmed hypocrite, is even extra cautious not to cause her any pain while necking with her. Undoubtedly, this brute force in men's handling women in Romanian interwar literature is related to the desire to dominate sexually, physically and psychologically a heterosexual relationship, which was supported by the social arrangement of deprivileging women in society or as de Beauvoir affirms in her *The Second Sex* (1949) in the part entitled "Lived Experience" where the author describes woman's condition: "virile prestige is far from being eradicated: it still stand on solid economic and social bases" (328). It comes to realizing the choices actually available for a woman of the Age.

5.2. The "Fig Tree" fable and the feasibility of girls' choices in Plath's and Serghi's novel

In her analysis of the choices men and women make, de Beauvoir speaks of the "collective unconscious" (80) as a psychological term, the other name of determinism, which significantly limits the array of actual available choices for both sexes and which in the 1950s boiled down to men having to advance in society and women having to become good housewives. In discussing Bachelard and Sartre, de Beauvoir synthesizes their conclusions as to man's relation to "wholeness" and proposes that "man is not fascinated by wholeness because it symbolizes feminine virginity: rather, his love for wholeness makes virginity precious" (80). De Beauvoir has also the following to say as regards predetermined human behavior and psychoanalysis: "If the psychoanalytical method is often productive in spite of errors in theory, it is because there are givens in every individual case so generalized that no one would dream of denying them: situations and behavior patterns recur; the moment of decision springs out of generality and repetition" (81). Human anatomy was still considered an unchangeable given: "Anatomy is destiny,' said Freud; and this phrase is echoed by Merleau-Ponty: 'The body is generality" (de Beauvoir 81). We still cannot escape our bodies now, but we can transform them sexually. This transformation was much less likely and possible in the 1950s although the decade also saw one of the most famous American transgender persons ever – Christine Jorgensen who in 1952 underwent a sex reassignment surgery in Denmark – from male to female. Upon

returning to the USA, the transgender woman found that the only way she could make a living was through public appearances, very much against her desire for a private life and so she became a lecturer on transsexuality.

As a heterosexual woman with no intention of changing her sex, Esther (Plath) presents to the reader the choices that she believes are available for her in the famous "Fig tree" fable. It is about a Jewish man and a beautiful dark nun who keep meeting under the tree to pick the ripe figs. However, one day a bird pecks its way out of an egg in a nest in the tree and the nun does not come back anymore, but in her place comes a mean Catholic kitchen maid. When they are done, she counts how many figs she has picked and compares them to his take to make sure he has not picked more (*BJ* 57). Esther's interpretation is the following: "It seemed to me Buddy Willard and I were like that Jewish man and that nun, although of course we weren't Jewish or Catholic but Unitarian. We had met together under our own imaginary fig-tree, and what we had seen wasn't a bird coming out of an egg but a baby coming out of a woman, and then something awful happened and we went our separate ways" (*BJ* 57).

The Fig tree fable appears to be about the equal division of goods which can only be exacted by *a mean Catholic kitchen maid*. The fable seems to suggest in general that other women would not have made a problem – the beautiful nun. It also suggests that only a Jewish man could get angry if he is held accountable for such a distribution between the two sexes. The fable presupposes women could obtain more equality, if they asked for it, and most likely, their demand would be granted by men, except in some very rare cases. Of course, there could be other men behaving like the Jew from the fable without being Jewish or women like the mean Catholic kitchen maid, without being Catholic or working in the kitchen. The fable also clearly qualifies a woman who asks for equality to be *mean*, and a man making a problem about it to be a miser. In this equality (not) asked, equality (not) given, there is no good understanding between the sexes. The moment with the hatching bird is also important – it seems to stand for a side issue arising from the equal distribution of goods, and a good woman would back off completely at its appearance. Finally, the fable strongly suggests that if women want no problems about equality, they had better shut up and

remain silent and then they will be considered *beautiful and good*. Whereas the very posing of the demand relates them to the seminal scene from *Oliver Twist* where Oliver is asking for more (Dickens 15-17) with the consequence that the man in the white waistcoat declares that he "[Oliver] will be hung" (Dickens 16).

Esther's interpretation about herself completely excludes any equality quarrels with her would-be husband, which meant that Plath does not think that there could be such an issue between them because she is not the Catholic maid, nor he the Jew. The other option for Esther is the beautiful nun who leaves at the first problem, but Plath is not that, either and parting is again the interpretation that the author gives from the perspective of her failing marriage with Hughes; as for the woman giving birth instead of the bird hatching, this may be a reference to Assia Wevill since Hughes told Plath that Assia was pregnant with his child as shown in the movie *Sylvia*. Just at about that time, according to Frieda Hughes, Ted was considering going back to Plath.

The interpretation that Esther makes of the fable is the following: "From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers" (*BJ* 80). Esther cannot make up her mind which of them she wants as some are mutually exclusive: "as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet" (*BJ* 80). Plath's (Esther's) final interpretation is that all the choices are available but making all of them is an illusion. These are opportunities that are for grabs only for a given timeframe. Getting married, it seems, was picking the wrong fig which was internally rotten.

What Esther fantasizes about, Diana acts upon. In Serghi's novel, Diana picks a rotten fig, too, by marrying Michi, but she manages to pick some other figs as well such as work for several lawyers without being paid, having a lover – Alex Dobrescu, having some friends. Despite one fig being rotten, still Diana manages to taste some truly

delicious figs, some of which, as friendship with others would prove, unripe. It should be noted that Diana resorts to having a lover only after she is convinced that she is getting no satisfaction from her relationship with her husband and even then, she has enough qualms to back off at the last moment. Also, she starts fantasizing about marrying Alex until she convinces herself that Alex is not a man for one woman, and she could never count on him choosing only herself. But wanting to be an all-Romanian girl also means that she was supposed to be taken to a man's small apartment in the big city where they would enjoy making love and then she would return to prosaic married life (276). Her reasoning is: "Someone had to invite me to his apartment! One gets used to it… For Heaven's sake, I'm not uglier than other women" (276). Since Serghi's work is a novel of development we know what Diana is finally left with. All the figs that seem available in the beginning, either fall and get wrinkled, as in Esther's fantasy, or turn too unsavory for Diana's taste with the worst of all being the marriage. We can picture her standing under the fig tree about to leave in sadness when, somewhere from the top of the tree, a small one starts falling, she hears the rustle of the fig leaves, turns around just in time to open her palm and catch it – small, but not green and surprisingly satisfying – Diana's obtaining the position of a drama chronicler with Mr Mata, a position she has never hoped for, which is not much but still means that she will be able to survive in the capital Bucharest and which gives her the financial support that she so badly needs to be able to keep her modest room and be part of the life of the big city (391).

As de Beauvoir claims, decisions are born of "generality and repetition" (81). In Esther's case the repetitive pattern of occurrences leading to her depression results both in her decision to commit suicide and the resolution to live afterwards. In Diana's case the same repetitions also lead to her depression in Bucharest but getting out of it is yet another decision which comes with the first truly paying job there. About both, it could be said that perhaps they are secretly hoping, as the Turkish poet Nâzim Hikmet would say, that "the most beautiful days are yet to come".

The parallel discussion of represented sexuality in *The Bell Jar* and *The Spider's Web* has offered interesting insights as to the sexual mores of the respective epochs, the 1950s USA and 1920s/1930s

Romania. The numerous sensual scenes in the Romanian novels by male writers would qualify the men's advances on the respective women as near rape by comparison to Plath's and Serghi's novels. Still, it is beneficial for everyone that the writers were frank enough about it to offer a valuable testimony. It seems the Romanian writers of the 1930s benefited from the translation of D. H. Lawrence's classic only to the extent that they could become vocal of previously repressed sexuality in fiction. The realistic trend of Romanian Modernism is not to be regretted since, together with the seminal works from the American writers and the autofictional accounts of writers such as Plath and Serghi, we can learn much more about those times than from documentaries, the secret lying in the intense fictionalized lived experience in the novels at hand. It is to be regretted, though, that Bulgarian modernist novelists such as Dimitar Dimov, Dimitar Talev and Emiliyan Stanev rather chose to share in the suggestive silence and confirm Foucault's claim that we are but "other Victorians" (1). As for the actually available opportunities in Romania and America, respectively, they were not many in reality, and those that materialized, as both writers' novels testify, indicated that women, in fact, had to satisfy themselves with little, the other option being not to receive anything at all.

6. The autofictional ailing self: disease in Sylvia Plath vs Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Hervé Guibert, Pascal du Duve and Max Blecher

In her influential *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* Susan Sontag accentuates on yet another self each one of us has: "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place" (8). Sontag hastens to clarify that she is not about to describe the "lived experience" in that kingdom where we so reluctantly dwell, but the "punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation" (8). She also specifies that "illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness – and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (8). In fiction, however, fully

aware of its role to entertain among others, sometimes subconsciously, certain metaphors do appear, and they are quite steady, although they might also be period- or nation-based, and modifications may occur. Since this study is about lived experience in fiction, which can also be autofiction, we are interested to know if these metaphors also appear in the autofictions under consideration. The illnesses to be examined as lived by the respective authors are *depression* (Plath), *cancer* (Solzhenitsyn), *AIDS* (Hervé Guibert, Pascal du Duve), and *osseous tuberculosis* (Max Blecher). Here it should be noted that Plath in *The Bell Jar* writes not only about the disease she was suffering from, but also about diseases that were not part of her own personal lived experience as a sick person. Thus, she also writes about cancer and tuberculosis. For these Sontag provides the following metaphors which have changed over time, literary genres, and movements: *depression* unromantic, it "has supplanted the romantic notion of melancholy" (43). So, she defines it as "melancholy minus its charms – the animation, the fits" (43). *Cancer* – related to evasive talk both on part of the doctors and the relatives so that they would not be pitied unnecessarily since they are not the ones that are dying of it (10), synonymous with death and unromantic since its source is usually considered to be the food one consumes and so it is related to the lower extremes and excretory system. There are many contemporary examples both in literature and film though where *cancer* is regularly romanticized as are films such as *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014), *Dying Young* (1991) and *A Walk to Remember* (2002). There is also the TV series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) which shows how such a subject can be exploited with honesty, candor, and humor and what insightful results such a treatment yields, that it can be educational, uplifting and highly entertaining as a show. The earliest figurative uses Sontag indicates are related to "idleness and sloth" (16) due to its slow progression. Sontag contrasts it with tuberculosis which in the 19th century was portrayed as spiritual by several writers among whom Dostoyevsky in *Crime and Punishment* in the prostitute Sonia, Dumas-fils in *La Dame aux Camelias*, Emily Brontë herself – in the dying Catherine, though arguably the least romantic of all since she was to have the same death herself and was already consumptive when she was writing the fever scenes in *Wuthering Heights*. The romantic representation of tuberculosis as a

disease of the "spiritual" was related to an inflammation of the respiratory tracts and the resulting extreme pallor on the faces of the afflicted with dramatic red flushing which suddenly made women appear even more frail and beautiful. These manifestations suggested a divorce from everything material, opting for the heavenly and unearthly. The ones who were not suffering, such as Byron, for instance, yearned for the pale tubercular look and he is known to have expressed a satisfaction with his temporary pallor resulting from an illness which made him look tubercularly spiritual. A Romanian novel from the 1930s, when tuberculosis was still an incurable disease, shows a modernist irony of this representation as in Anton Holban's *Ioana* where the Bulgarian Dr Abramov is comically trying to look spiritual, being fat (full of air), while probably suffering from tuberculosis[66] (Boev 182). Again, from the 19th century, we have numerous representations of melancholy related to depression (absence of the tubercular symptoms) as in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" where the main protagonist is pale, apathetic, sedentary, and suffering from an unknown undiagnosed disease. Both depression and melancholy may be the result of a totally different condition, state, or in the case of the latter – a temperament. For instance, melancholy in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and Dimcho Debelyanov's "I Want to Remember You Like That" (Искам да те помня все така) where we have the beautiful melancholic aesthetics of represented sadness arising from terminal tuberculosis. Clinical depression could be the byproduct of a different disease, as Sontag also indicates, including tuberculosis, cancer, or AIDS (100). If *tuberculosis* traditionally stands for passion, *cancer* is associated with "the repression of passion" (23). Today, *cancer* is the traditional metaphor for something that sprawls out of control, a malignant form which cannot be curbed as in *The Matrix* when agent Smith is interrogating Morpheus and memorably declares: "Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet." Sontag likens *AIDS* perception to that of syphilis once (84) – as a slowly progressing stigmatized and deadly disease. Sontag rightfully distinguishes between the perception of *cancer* and *HIV/ AIDS*, the former being associated with pity and injustice while the latter with

[66] See Boev, Hristo. *The Different Dobruja between the Wars* (182). – a. n.

shame and guilt (87). *AIDS*, as Sontag suggests, could be viewed as someone's being on a death row with the death sentence certain and only the execution date unclear (92). All in all, Sontag sees *AIDS* and *cancer* as related metaphors that occasionally overlap, but mostly *AIDS* strikes fear and terror one would find in "premodern diseases like leprosy and syphilis" (100). Most *AIDS* movies have a strong educational and political message and abstain from being overly romantic. Some of the best ones are: *The Normal Heart* (2014), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), *120 BPM* (2017), *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), *Philadelphia* (1993) and *And the Band Played On* (1993). Those dealing with the 1990s portray *AIDS* in one of its most steadfast metaphors – as a plague when it ravaged the gay community in San Francisco and the painfully slow measures by the government to address the issue. *120 BPM* is an excellent French movie which goes back to the same period and reviews the actions of the French Act Up movement.

Most of the metaphors Sontag covers characterized the literature of the 19th century and with AIDS – the 20th; this metaphoric representation of diseases could be viewed as euphemistic of their true devastating nature and harrowing lived experience, because even when a word like *plague* is used, one cannot imagine the true horror of a person that is actually going through it, nor the superhuman strength that person needs to be able to transform it into literature. All one gets out of such metaphors is stigmatizing labels and pitying the sufferers, with the single exception of the *beautiful tuberculosis*. Despite the modern advances of medicine people keep dying in their thousands from these and other diseases, one of the recent depression victims being Chester Bennington from Linkin Park (d. 2017), one from cancer – Marie Fredriksson from Roxette (d. 2019). AIDS has stopped being the plague it was in the 1990s, but the death toll is still staggering: in 2019 – around 690 000 people according to WHO, for suicides WHO states a similar number annually – more than 700 000.

We have already seen Plath's portrayal of depression which is as clinically precise as possible with descriptions of the onset of the condition, her inability to read and concentrate, her heavy migraines and insomnia, her incapacity to articulate meaningfully how she feels. In that Plath does not see anything romantic or melancholic and she

tries to remain lucid and capture as much as possible from this lived experience so she can render it to paper. Her approach is scientific, without the slightest trace of lament or regret. Her post-depressive ironies in retrospect reflect how she felt then – August 1953, her passing into the "kingdom of the sick" and her perceived degradation in the eyes of the residents of the better kingdom. For example, in the pity that a nurse takes on her when she temporarily loses her eyesight in the wake of her suicide attempt: "A cheery voice spoke out of the dark. 'There are lots of blind people in the world. You'll marry a nice blind man some day" (*BJ* 181). There is also her mother's condescension: "My mother took care never to tell me to do anything. She would reason with me sweetly, like one intelligent mature person with another" (*BJ* 127). Once Esther's (Plath's) condition worsens, she can observe her mother's helplessness, how she starts treating her as a subhuman being in a Kafkaesque iteration of *The Metamorphosis* where Gregor has turned into a gigantic bug and has to watch in consternation how his family of humans are plotting his murder: "I watched my mother grow smaller and smaller until she disappeared into the door of Doctor Gordon's office building. Then I watched her grow larger and larger as she came back to the car. 'Well?' I could tell she had been crying. My mother didn't look at me. She started the car" (*BJ* 143). Gradually she starts treating Esther like a small child: "My mother smiled. 'I knew my baby wasn't like that.' I looked at her. 'Like what?' 'Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital.' She paused. 'I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (*BJ* 154). Esther (Plath) also becomes paranoid, and she starts suspecting that her mother might want to kill her with the ECT therapy. Esther's conversations with a boy on the beach in Boston only confirm her worst suspicions (*BJ* 164). With Esther's affected vision, tormented by severe depression, Boston has completely lost its pure blue magic from Plath's short stories and memories about her childhood. Instead, Esther is blinded by the sun and all the contours are blurry, very much as in Camus's *L'Étranger* where the protagonist kills an Arab on the beach without being able to see him well: "I rolled on my stomach and squinted at the view in the other direction […]. A glassy haze rippled up from the fires in the grills and the heat on the road, and through the haze, as through a curtain of clear water, I could make out a smudgy skyline of gas tanks and factory

stacks and derricks and bridges" (*BJ* 165). The inability to see is also reflected in the perceived weakening of her body and mind: "And when people found out my mind had gone, as they would have to, sooner or later, in spite of my mother's guarded tongue, they would persuade her to put me into an asylum where I could be cured. Only my case was incurable" (*BJ* 168). Esther's suicide attempt brings the worst in her mother who egocentrically believes it was her fault (*BJ* 215). Esther's (Plath's) depression leads to her complete rupture with everyone she knew or cared about her, including her boyfriend who is himself convalescent from tuberculosis. Plath portrays depression as a direct descent into a black abyss and her depictions of the harrowing experience are honest, her self-analysis – merciless and unrelenting, the suicide appears to be a dignified attempt to preserve the agency of making a choice rather than be offered as a guinea pig to the doctors for their experiments.

However, Plath's description of Esther's most extreme gesture – her attempts to kill herself, which finally results in her using sedatives, is one of the most unnerving and grotesque at the same time. Plath does that with so much absurdist humor and grim determination that she creates some of the most unforgettable moments of pure absurdism in World Literature:

> That morning I had tried to hang myself. I had taken the silk cord of my mother's yellow bathrobe as soon as she left for work, and, in the amber shade of the bedroom, fashioned it into a knot that slipped up and down on itself. It took me a long time to do this, because I was poor at knots and had no idea how to make a proper one. Then I hunted around for a place to attach the rope. The trouble was, our house had the wrong kind of ceilings. The ceilings were low, white and smoothly plastered, without a light fixture or a wood beam in sight. I thought with longing of the house my grandmother had before she sold it to come and live with us, and then with my Aunt Libby […] After a discouraging time of walking about with the silk cord dangling from my neck like a yellow cat's tail and finding no place to fasten it, I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and tried pulling the cord tight. But each time I would get the cord so tight I could feel a rushing in my ears and a flush of blood in my face, my hands would weaken and let go, and I would be all right again (*BJ* 168).

There is nothing romantic or glorifying in Esther's pitiful attempts, the very act becoming a parody of itself. The comic effect is also completely natural, but, of course, one could not even laugh, knowing that Plath did eventually do it only weeks after *The Bell Jar* was published in England. The matter-of-fact details she adds to the passage as is the name of her aunt, as well as the *longing* for a fixture on which to hang herself, with the imminent death of its author, make this description unique.

While Plath utilizes bitter self-ironies as regards her own depression, she is resentful of the depression of others – the girl Joan whom she sees as a rival since she has had a short relationship with Buddy Willard, another scene prophetic of Assia Weevil's copycat suicide after becoming Hughes's wife. One has the sensation that at moments Plath would have wished to accumulate all the world's depression like a black hole so she could unleash a deadly gamma ray blast that would pitifully end so much human misery. All that attests to the fact that Plath appropriated depression and made it part of her literary and real-life self which could act up at any moment. As far as other diseases go though, for example, cancer, Plath's attitude is one of scientific curiosity, but is short-lived: "Twenty days after that mole appeared the girl was dead,' the doctor said and everybody went very quiet for a minute and then the bell rang, so I never really found out what the mole was or why the girl had died" (*BJ* 66). When she hears of "sickle cell anaemia", Esther declares it a "depressing disease" (*BJ 66*), but then she is her normal non-depressive self, prior to depression striking, which makes Esther appear the bright sparkling overachiever that Plath also was. By contrast, the *Journals* offer human sympathy in the shape of many more words when it is about Plath's grandmother who was slowly dying of cancer in 1956: "my dearest grandmother who took care of me all my life while mother worked is dying very slowly and bravely of cancer, and she has not even been able to have intravenous feeding for six weeks but is living on her body, which will be all sublimed away" (*J* 143).

Tuberculosis in the 1950s USA was already not only a manageable, but also a curable disease after the invention of streptomycin in 1943. No longer the consuming disease from 1920s novels such as Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* or *Three Soldiers*, Plath

portrays Esther's tubercular boyfriend Buddy Willard gradually weakening but also recovering from it. Far from being portrayed as spiritual, Esther sees him as hypocritical, weak, pragmatic, unattractive and uninteresting. As Cella Serghi might have said, he does not thrill her, but she starts a relationship with him, thinking that as a good 1950s US girl she is supposed to have a boyfriend who would be a decent boy with a certain career before him, she could marry him and have an all-American family, kids and all. And Buddy Willard has an exact prototype who recognizes himself in the literary character although he disagrees partly with the description Plath makes of him – the medical student at the time – Lameyer. Esther seems oddly unsympathetic to Buddy: "I told Buddy how sorry I was about the TB and promised to write, but when I hung up I didn't feel one bit sorry. I only felt a wonderful relief. I thought the TB might just be a punishment for living the kind of double life Buddy lived and feeling so superior to people" (*BJ* 75). Esther is also equally cold and even scornful of underachieving handicapped boys who are presented to her because she believes she deserves better (*BJ* 60).

All in all, Esther emerges as a cold witty overachiever who believes she deserves the best in the masculine department although she is white and poor. She is very intelligent, occasionally manipulative, often hard to understand in her actions. She can also become depressive to a vastly transformative effect. Rarely, when the drive to pursue high marks lessens a bit, a good tender nature shows through. Amazingly, through Esther, Plath has succeeded in describing herself as perceived by the others (if we recall those perceptions from Chapter 1) despite the narrative being in the first person, a major difference from Serghi's narrative where Diana reveals herself to be very different in her account of the events from the way she is seen by the others. Indeed, the innermost Plath should, as it has been revealed, be sought in the *Journals* and the *Johnny Panic prose,* as well as in certain poems. The cold insensitive overachiever was a product of the Cold War and Eisenhower, it was the mask everyone wanted to see and embrace as the ultimate reality.

6.1. Symbol and sentiment in *Cancer Ward* – Solzhenitsyn's response

In *Cancer Ward* (*Ра́ковый ко́рпус*)[67] Solzhenitsyn portrays the languishing away of cancer patients as they fall victim both to their cancers and to the radiotherapy they are treated with. Solzhenitsyn himself suffered from lymphoma but this type of cancer is not ascribed to the protagonist Oleg Filimonovich Kostoglotov who has stomach cancer. Pavel Nikolayevich Rusanov, the personnel official is the one who has the writer's kind of cancer. Published in England only 5 years after *The Bell Jar*, *Cancer Ward* was a book that was written at almost the same time as Plath's novel. However, the approach that Solzhenitsyn took, while describing diseases, was very different from the American writer. While we can certainly see *The Bell Jar* as symbolic – the depression that Esther has dominates the narrative and even before it starts, one could say that the main protagonist is prone to it – by seeing everything as dark – *Cancer Ward* is overly and deeply symbolic with the symbols much easier to decipher. The overall recognition out of Solzhenitsyn's novel is that it condemns manifestations of Stalinism as malignant growths and as a human being enters remissions with the cancer eventually returning with a vengeance and destroying the organism, so is a state destroyed from within by such a cancerous regime in which the remissions are occasional spells of hope. On a global scale, the Cancer Ward, in which the characters lose their lives and dreams one by one, reflects the Soviet state and the Gulags it had built for torturing the bright and progressive citizens of the USSR. Solzhenitsyn's novel can be read as a cancer encyclopedia as well with the various kinds of cancer the patients have and here we come to the other symbols. They fall very neatly in line with the multiple metaphors that Sontag proposes for this disease. Mainly, they all represent evil – and that is the evil within, unknown to the carriers, inhabiting each one of the citizens of the USSR, like Truman's doppelgänger living in every American from Sexton's "Rumpelstiltskin".

The secret nature of this evil is revealed from the very first page of the novel: "It isn't, it isn't cancer, is it, Doctor? I haven't got cancer?'

[67] Translated from Russian by Nicholas Bethein and David Burg. – a. n.

Pavel Nikolayevich asked hopefully, lightly touching the malevolent tumor on the right side of his neck. It seemed to grow almost daily, yet the tight skin on the outside was as white and inoffensive as ever. 'Good heavens, no. Of course not.' Dr. Dontsova soothed him, for the tenth time" (1). Not only does the skin mask the cancer so it is completely unseen even from a close distance, the medical specialist lies to the patient convinced that cancer patients, like the soviet citizens under the cruel totalitarian regime, should also be spared the truth. The illusions some patients have are also symbolic of the soviet citizens living in denial of the many evils that are visible, very much like the symbol of Plath's *The Bell Jar* – the hemisphere which has covered them in its pestilential fumes and out of which there is no escape. Just like Plath, Solzhenitsyn manages to use a light humor accompanied by a good irony. For instance, in this remarkable scene: "Outside it was a gloomy, still, colorless day. Kostoglotov came back from his morning X ray and without asking Pavel Nikolayevich opened a small window above his head. The air he let in was damp but not cold. Pavel Nikolayevich was afraid of his tumor catching cold" (42). Unlike Plath's cold stance to disease, even her own, *Cancer Ward* shows numerous scenes of accepting the inevitable, sometimes in a dramatic but sincere farewell with a certain human faculty or body part as in Assya asking Dyomka to kiss her breast before it is cut off (392-5). Even though the girl does not particularly like the boy, she realizes that she must make do with what she has and so she repeats as if in a reverie: "You'll remember?... You'll remember, won't you? You'll remember it was here, and what it was like?' Assya's tears kept dropping onto his close-cropped head" (395). The unexpected intimacy of the doomed is both touching and terrifying: "When she did not take it away, he returned to its rosy glow again and again, softly kissing the breast. He did what her future child would never be able to do. No one came in, and so he kissed and kissed the marvel hanging over him. Today it was a marvel. Tomorrow it would be in the trash bin" (395).

Although Plath's depression was a private thing – it was with her before her marriage and was resumed with a new vehement flare after Hughes left her – in her works it traverses and marks consistently her represented 1950s and so casts a dark shroud over the entire decade in which Eisenhower was president. For us, the readers, Plath's works

present a depressive America of the decade of Eisenhower. In a similar manner Solzhenitsyn offers criticism of the USSR and Stalin, and his *Cancer Ward* does just that. Written after Stalin's death, it reveals the heavy legacy that had to be borne. Like the multiple references to the American president that Plath makes, so does Solzhenitsyn and they culminate in the Zoo scene the patients dream of visiting in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. When he is finally out of the Ward, not completely cured, impotent from the therapy and with the option of spending a night with one of two attractive women as a guest, Solzhenitsyn takes Kostoglotov to the Zoo where all the animals look miserable and tortured, like the citizens of the USSR, but here it is much more visible, as if evil has suddenly gained visibility. Standing before the cage of the macaque rhesus he reads that some cruel visitor has blinded the monkey on purpose by throwing tobacco into its eyes (506). The notice is strangely devoid of propaganda – no blame put on the American imperialists (506). That visitor is called "evil" and as pure unadulterated evil, Kostoglotov can think of only one – Stalin. Although not expressed metaphorically as the represented lived experience in Plath's and Solzhenitsyn's characters, cancer and depression become global metaphors for both novels, condemning the political regimes and hypocrisy-infested societies.

6.2. Guibert and *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*: the death of a titan that belongs to the author of the book

Hervé Guibert killed himself – he attempted to end his life a little before his 36th birthday and died from the injuries two weeks later in 1991. However, he only did it because his eyesight had been taken away from him by the disease that was killing him, and which had become his writing focus in the last series of books he produced. Guibert thus made the so-called AIDS trilogy consisting of his bestseller – *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (*A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*[68]) (1990) followed by *The Compassion Protocol* (*Le protocol compassionnel*) (1991) and *The Man with the Red Hat* (*L'homme au chapeau rouge*) (1992). His *Cytomegalovirus, a Hospitalization Diary* (*Cytomegalovirus, journal d'hospitalisation*) (1992) and *Paradise* (*Le*

[68] The translations from this text, as well as from all the others are only for the purposes of this study and do not pursue a financial gain. – a. n.

Paradis) (1992) are not part of this cycle, the former being an AIDS hospital diary, not a novel, and the latter being a novel but detached from the autofictional representation of the disease which is not the case with the first two novels of his trilogy. Dying a month after Freddie Mercury, as with him, his incurable disease had served as a powerful artistic stimulus. Born in 1955, Guibert was a child of the Cold War from France. An author of numerous books, an established writer in France, he became instantly famous with *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* because the book presented a detailed account of the death of no other but Michel Foucault who is presented to the reader as Muzil. In this autofictional presentation of his contracting the virus, his hope that there might be a cure and the dramatic death of Foucault, Guibert did not even try to mask his name. When asked on a TV interview how he had dared to write about Foucault's health decline and subsequent death, Guibert answered that being sick himself, in Foucault he saw his own death, he felt that "this death belonged to him" (*Apostrophes: Hervé Guibert "A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie" | Archive INA*). A little before his death, he filmed himself in his apartment and titled the short movie *La Pudeur ou l'Impudeur* (1991) where he talks openly about his disease, looks extremely gaunt, presents filmed moments of his everyday existence that is strained by his condition, the movie challenging the reader's senses if they can go on and see it to the end sharing with him his *horreur au quotidien*.

As can be seen from this short presentation of Guibert, in this book he managed to do away with some of the AIDS metaphors discussed by Sontag, but others remained and the book he started writing became in many ways what *The Bell Jar* became for Plath. Heavily stigmatized in the 1980s and beginning of 1990s AIDS was a death sentence and the sick were treated like lepers once were, so Guibert writes about the fact that he has remained without friends and the book becomes "his sole companion" (12). Writing *The Bell Jar* in England, Plath was likewise abandoned by just about everyone. In that depression and AIDS have a lot in common, the definitive diseases of solitude. The personal experience for both writers results in both providing detailed medical information about their condition and its consequences. So, we learn about the exact T 4 count Guibert had 3 months after having the disease (13), etc.

Falling sick, Guibert feels he has become "a dead man walking" and so observes: "I felt death come in the mirror, from my reflection in it, way before it had taken firm hold. Was I already that dead man through my look in the eyes of the others? I did not tell it to all. For the time being only to the book" (15). Just like Plath (Esther) who delays telling her mother, so does Guibert tell his friends a bit later, but he feels that this is just a matter of time, and not much time. The moment he does so, however, he feels he instantly loses control over his illness (15). Muzil (Foucault), when learning from Guibert about "a cancer that attacks exclusively the homosexuals" (21), starts wallowing on the floor with laughter, being already contaminated with the virus, but he protests that it is too good to be true (21). However, soon Muzil (Foucault) lapses into "a severe depression" and that laughter turns out to be a pretense. As Guibert indicates, depression can be related to other conditions, one of them being the terrible news that one had AIDS. The two passports that Sontag speaks of are related to the fact that a life-changing disease like AIDS gives one a new identity (25). So Muzil (Foucault) decides to invent a new writer's self so that that grand critic's name somehow remains untainted. The name he comes up with for an article of his is "Julien de l'Hôpital" (26), but as it can be expected, this writer's avatar instantly makes the article obscure. Muzil (Foucault) adores the violent orgies in the saunas and Guibert suggests that he got infected there – in San Francisco, the USA, refraining from frequenting the Paris ones due to his easily recognizable face (28), already closed in 1988, 4 years after Foucault's death due to the pandemic (29). The heavily debilitating disease has Muzil (Foucault) lose his identity completely and we no longer recognize the great critical mind in the suffering man (32).

Just like Plath, Guibert makes fleeting marks of the deaths of others from other diseases, for example lung cancer – one of the doctors (40), being transfixed by AIDS and the unexplored new human geographies of sickness it opens for himself as lived experience and for Muzil (Foucault) whose passing he recalls introducing detail after detail (40). There is a lot of sick dark humor in his description – as in Muzil (Foucault) visiting one of the local GPs to be examined for his interminable coughing, only to be reassured by the doctor that he is "in perfect health" (47) and that only one month before his death. The book

continues with details about the promise Guibert was made to be saved via a miraculous medicine, his then taking AZT – the only available medication which was more detrimental than beneficial. Again, just like Plath, Guibert's candid testimony from AIDS early days as a pandemic, offers invaluable information not only about Foucault's last days, but also about the lived experience of the writer who put to paper everything that happened to him with the immediacy of someone who felt that his days were numbered. Being a totally different disease from depression although able to trigger depression, as in Foucault's case, AIDS allowed excellent writers like Guibert to provide thrilling, scientifically accurate observations and poignant remarks while watching their bodies become stripped of the identities they associated with them, taking on a totally new identity – *l'(im)pudeur* of everyone who could watch Guibert's last film about himself. If AIDS brought a reinvention of the writer's self in Guibert or in Collard with his *Nuits Fauves* (1992), it saw the birth and death of a writer such as Pascal du Duve with his *Cargo vie* (1993).

6.3. Loving the disease: Max Blecher and Pascal du Duve

To this list I add Max Blecher's *Inimi Cicatrizate* (*Scarred Hearts*)[69] from 1937, now a major movie from 2016. Both the book and the movie explore tuberculosis (in Blecher's own case, Pott's Disease) more in the vein of Solzhenitsyn – with the love in the time of cholera trope of people trying to remain as live and open to experiences and sentiments as possible, with a lot of humor and laughter through tears in the face of impending doom, and last, but not least, Romanian sensualism and eroticism. Max Blecher, also called "the Romanian Kafka" died one year after the publication of this autofictional work of his[70]. Blecher finds himself in Sebastian's widely acclaimed *Journal 1935 to 1944* and Paul Bailey, author of the "Introduction" to the

[69] The English translation by Henry Howard will be used, Old Street Publishing, 2008. – a. n.

[70] A modern example of life writing, also worthy of consideration for the valuable lived experience captured to paper is Matei Călinescu's *Un altfel de jurnal* (*A Different Journal*) published in 2010, with its writer dying the previous year of lung cancer. Executed with the capacity of a university professor who has been given one year to live and filling the pages with a poetic amalgam of philosophical reflections, disease progression data and memories, it remains a fascinating read. – a. n.

English edition of Blecher's novel, quotes from Sebastian's book to illustrate the sick writer's condition. Published for the first time in Bucharest in 1996, 51 years after its creation, Sebastian's *Journal* provides intimate details about Blecher's physical and mental state and they are shown to be at variance with the transcendental superhuman humor in the novel, but not with the physical description of the suffering protagonist: "[Blecher] is living in the intimate company of death. It is not a vague, abstract death in the long term, but his own death, precise, definite, known in detail like an object" (v). So, Sebastian is further quoted:

> What gives him the courage to live? What keeps him going? He is not even in despair. I swear I don't understand. How many times have I been on the verge of tears when I looked at him. At night I could hear him groaning and crying out in his room – and I felt there was someone else in the house apart from us, a someone who was death, fate, or whatever. I came away feeling shattered, bewildered (Bailey vi).

According to Bailey, this courage was "the novel he was in the difficult process of writing" (vi). That is, the novel in question and indeed one may only wonder at the spirit one would need, under such circumstances, to see the endeavor through.

The protagonist, as in Plath's novel, is a fictional character based on the writer, Emanuel, here presenting a third-person narrative. He is absolutely sure that "he was gravely ill. The evidence was plain from everything around him. What was the significance of all these machines? They were clearly not made for the healthy" (4). After an X-ray, the patient learns from a French doctor that part of his vertebra is "eaten away by microbes" (5). The young patient's initial lack of understanding is supplanted by a horrific realization: "His chest had become a chasm in which he could hear a loud noise like the roaring in a seashell when you put it next to your ear. The thumping of his heart resounded in the emptiness. It would be possible, he realized, for his body to disintegrate between one moment and the next" (6). Faced with the prospect of portending disintegration, like Esther, who does not want to live "another 50 years in a cage", Emanuel thinks of suicide (7). The irony in his case is that he is too weak to even lift his hand, being tied to supporting metal bars. Emanuel, like Esther, lovingly imagines it: "It was certainly a fine idea, just as fine as, for example, the [trapped]

mouse returning to its hole, but equally vague and unrealistic" (7). Yet, facing death, Emanuel vibrantly declares that "I [he] am [is] only interested in life now" (9). Still, in the TB clinic, patients commit suicide and Emanuel quotes an Englishman who has done it leaving a note that begins with: "all this buttoning and unbuttoning" (16) referring to the many daily examinations a patient goes through with the subsequent dressing and undressing.

Blecher's light humor and elegant style, under the impossible circumstances of the literal disintegration of his body, are among the finest of the major Romanian novelists of the epoch. Another example of Blecher's finesse is the following: "She [Colette] and Emanuel would make antiseptic love together, without any great sense of pleasure" (16). It merits to compare this line to the original to see how the English translator has made a slight change of meaning, resulting in domestication of the translation. Literally, the line reads: "Emanuel made hygienic love to her, devoid of big manifestations of voluptuousness" ("*Emanuel făcea cu ea o dragoste higienică, lipsită de mari voluptăți*" (11)). As more procedures are applied to him, like Plath's Esther, Emanuel learns more and more about his condition and so he tells Colette: "I am doing my apprenticeship in illness" (21). As Esther travels to different clinics with the declared scope of receiving better care for her condition, so does Emanuel who is moved to Berck[71]. Just like in Solzhenitsyn's and Plath's novels, Emanuel is able to establish connections with the multinational patients in the new sanatorium and find out about various forms of tuberculosis, thus offering a similar encyclopedia-like tragic-comic content through the prism of life possibly being cut short at any moment. After he is put in a cast, Emanuel offers the following thoughts on the subject: "this contrast between being a man like other men and yet lying imprisoned in a cast with tuberculosis eating away at your bones, that was what was so painful and sad about this illness. That was where the paradox lay: in existing, and yet not being 'fully alive'…" (43). Alongside with the witty conversations among the patients, we get a palpable sensation of Emanuel's reactions to the sanatorium and the cast: "During the night

[71] Also known as Berck-sur-mer in Northern France which was a famous location for treating tuberculosis in the 19th and early 20th centuries. – a. n.

the dampness became a cloak of fever and nightmares. Each time Emanuel lapsed into sleep for a moment, he plunged into a swamp" (77). While trying to draw the attention of one of the nurses, Solange, whom Emanuel finds attractive, he comes up with the liver pain Yossarian from the opening scene of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* invents to stay in the infirmary. Emanuel's playing the part is so verisimilar that he is moved by his own imaginary pain: "It's horrible,' whispered Emanuel, and he felt so sincerely sorry for himself that his eyes nearly filled with tears" (81). When the act of lovemaking is about to happen, Emanuel is painfully and ironically reminded by his "corset" of the new inverted gender reality which is a threshold to a celestial world where everything material will be gone and to which Victorian women were once forced into compliance: "Then something dreadful happened. For a brief moment Emanuel had forgotten about the corset, but now wrapped in Solange's arms, its weight bore down on him intolerably. Solange was embracing a bust of stone" (94), his pitiful attempt at lovemaking reduced to "an embarrassing simulacrum" (95).

With vivid descriptions of the changing seasons at Berck and the patients dying one after the other, Emanuel is both inside the sanatorium and out of it, but almost always assisted by others, especially by his beloved Solange for whom he keeps showing his feelings whenever he can. Eventually they have to part as she is also relapsing into sickness, never having been fully cured. So, the French coastal town becomes a symbol of melancholy and hopelessness (222) and he, on a stretcher-bed is being taken to yet another destination in Switzerland for a change of the atmosphere and of the nurses with darkness becoming the overwhelming symbol of simulacra of life: "In the distance the town, like a sinking ship, was disappearing in the darkness" (227).

Another writer who discovered his writing powers at the end of his short life, also curbed abruptly at the age of 29, like Blecher's, was the Belgian Pascal du Duve. Du Duve was writing his second novel when he found out that he had AIDS. He immediately stopped work on the novel and started recording his sensations and impressions of the transformations his body was experiencing. More importantly, he was registering his reactions to the incurable disease. So, he found that it gave him a new outlook on life, that he could see, as if for the first time, and discovered amazing beauty all around him on a real ship in the

middle of the ocean, which he related to what he lovingly called "*mon sida*" (my AIDS). This appropriation of the transforming disease is not surprising. So did Keats, writing some of his best poetic pieces with the imminent white death in mind such as "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode to a Grecian Urn", "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" in which he aspired to an ultimate communion with nature which went beyond what could be felt and experienced while one lived. That is, until death came too near and staring Keats in the face, he wrote his "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be" which effectively negates everything he had achieved as a poet with emptiness looming large ahead. With her intense insistence on the dark colors in *The Bell Jar* and in most of her other works, Plath, too, loved her recurring depression. At least she does in literature, if not in real life and that is the major difference between actual lived experience (lived by the author) and literary lived experience (lived by the reader, presupposing certain transformations and modifications of the actual lived experience, Jacqueline Rose's term – "fantasy", or realized *intentionality*). Plath, Keats, Guibert and Blecher created their best works strongly reflecting the ailing condition they were having, and it made them unique because reading their production based on illness, they could look at themselves as transformed people and see themselves as different from the others, almost as if they had a superpower, albeit leading to their own destruction, but at least they could exercise it often in spite of themselves. Despite Plath's desire to be an all-American girl, she, too, could appreciate her distinction from the others.

On the cruise ship, having left the novel unfinished, du Duve started a diary in which he has passages such as this:

> Before I got sick, I'd never felt so close to the stars. Now I pass the hours contemplating their silent twinkling coming from the Night of Times. Some of them certainly don't exist anymore, but their sweet mute glowing, like a posthumous present, still caresses our eyes. So, in communion with Eternity, I forget what differentiates Life and Death, and I imagine that I am, myself, a star. *Sidéen sidéral*[72] I dream of

[72] Untranslatable since both words refer to AIDS in French but their repetition indicates du Duve's embracing his fate bravely identifying himself with the disease, being a star with that name and the name itself makes him that star. – a. n.

> preserving my shining over those who will have loved me. I will be a dead *star*, but always luminous in some people's hearts (30).

Dying is not uncommonly perceived as a star losing its brilliance and becoming dark matter, du Duve's connection to the cosmos, however, is very strong and creates a sensation of astral poetics. He starts exploring the potential of the French word *sida* to render derivatives and comes up with *sidérable* and *sideré*, referring to different stages of the advancement of the disease, the first meaning "covertly having the marks and signs", while the second "visibly having the looks" of full-blown AIDS. The advancements from stage to stage are as important to him as are Plath's spirals to ever deeper depression which she meticulously recollects. Du Duve permits himself, from the position of the dying star, to give the following advice: "Become romantic again, think that fidelity – the present of reciprocity of the self and his/ her life companion – is far from being ridiculous, it is the key to the vault of the most beautiful love adventure" (35).

Du Duve starts seeing that life inevitably moves towards death and says with conviction: "a human being is born with the certainty of death. What we call a danger of dying are but the circumstances favoring the demise" (36). Du Duve's journal entries alternate between poetic contemplations of the surrounding sea, occasionally of other passengers, some of whom present the newly forbidden fruit of a homosexual encounter and delving into the past when love scenes were possible and passionate, without realizing the danger. Thus, his thoughts are beautiful and philosophical: "Are we born in the world? No, the world is born in us. When we give up the soul, that's the end of the world. So, every day, the world disappears for some, and at the same time, is born for others" (42). Other thoughts have a temporal tangent: "What is Eternity? They explain to us that it is not indefinite Time, but rather the absence – the simple and pure abolition of Time" (43). Life on Earth means feeling and savoring every moment as people move towards death of sensation: "We get then, by the bias of the etymology, to conclude that Eternity is incompatible with emotion. Eternal life, that is immobility. Immobility is death" (43). Du Duve disagrees with Marguerite Duras that writing means "being no one". He insists, fully aware, that he was to become that "luminous dead star", "by writing, one is revealed to oneself and to the others" (49), keeping this

luminescence alive; that is, inasmuch as the writing and reading subjects are aware of the text in question. Du Duve quotes and agrees with Husserl's phenomenological postulate that nothing exists outside the perceiving subject: "So, one day, not far from now, for my spirit that is becoming extinguished, even the sea will flow into its own depths. When I die, so will the sea be drowned" (50). Eternal life is what strikes him as terrible and humanly inconceivable, so he says with conviction, "yes, I find it agonizing that I might be condemned to this Eternal Life, all the more so for it is not at all certain that one can commit suicide in Heaven" (57). Philosopher by education and profession, du Duve appreciates the unique opportunity that he is presented with – to enter a virtual discussion with his favorite philosophers about the significance of life and death from the perspective of the youth with the theoretical knowledge and practical experience, so he is eternally grateful while being humanly afraid and he refers to the virus as "Dear, oh so dear HIV, see that you can make me feverish once again, as only you can, of this exact cold warmth which is your unmistakable signature wave, spreading silently your glacial effervescence within my entire body" (61). The physical sensations of the cold fever unleash du Duve's creative and scientific powers in a final showdown with human existence. In discoursing his condition and forthcoming death, du Duve offers a play of words that reflects his cosmic identification of the body breaking up. He does not want "*enterrement*" (burial in the earth) but "*encielèment*" (burial in heaven) – "a dispersal to all the winds of the ashes of [his] being" (63).

For du Duve AIDS becomes the ultimate experience which is as revealing as a meeting with God; it becomes his religion which involves the final transformation of his body and self and all the changes are worth writing down. And it might as well have been. Du Duve became a famous writer himself with his *Cargo vie*. After the book was published, he was invited to a TV interview which certainly frightened some of the spectators and presenters with the young writer collapsing a couple of times in front of the camera, looking visibly sick with markings of Kaposi sarcoma on his forehead and excusing himself, since, as he explained, the cancer had already affected his brain (*Durand la nuit*).

Shocking and vilified by many for its darkness after its appearance, *The Bell Jar* nowadays is a recognized major American classic for capturing the spirit of the 1950s, American culture and the symptoms, manifestations, and consequences of clinical depression. Already part of the longstanding tradition of life writing, it is one of the greatest examples of autofiction as well. Like the other pieces of life writing discussed here, it can also be used for educational purposes in combatting a certain disease.

6.4. Disease in autofiction vs fiction: *The Bell Jar* vs *Catcher in the Rye*

As shown, the autofictional ailing self in Plath, Solzhenitsyn, Guibert, Blecher and du Duve focuses exclusively on the disease marking the lived experience of the suffering writer and it colors the writing in such a manner that the other subjects of the work come out as marked by it. In the non-autofictional *Catcher in the Rye*, the main protagonist is not obsessed by any specific illness although he makes multiple indirect references to leukemia and for a reason. His brother Allie, whom he describes as having been "terrifically intelligent" (37) has died of it. As a result, cancer in the book acquires a certain romantic aspect – that of the tragically lost youth with a lot of promise and unrealized potential. By induction, Holden himself starts thinking he might have cancer based on the vague symptoms he has (168) and which could be signaling other diseases as well. In his desire to connect romantically to his brother whose death comes out as beautiful in his repeatedly reconstructed memory of him, but also as a perceived failure to play his self-appointed role of the Catcher in the field of rye who saves children from falling over into the precipice, Holden devises a curious touch of cancer for himself. Failing his self-assumed purpose in life, he fantasizes about becoming a romantic character in collective memory, but since he is unsure if people would even perceive him that way if he had the real disease, he invents a small tumor that could be easily removed from him and uses it with a girl: "I have this tiny little tumor on the brain.' 'Oh, *no*!' She put her hand up to her mouth and all. 'Oh, I'll be all right and everything! It's right near the outside. And it's a very tiny one. They can take it out in about two minutes" (54). In that Holden, the champion against phoniness, is guilty of being phony himself since he uses his supposedly terminal disease whose gravity he

presumably tries to downplay not to provoke the inevitable pitying on part of the others, but that is exactly what he provokes – trying to experience the romanticism of the dying youth without being afflicted with the disease.

Having mastered the guise of a fake illness, he uses it on another important occasion – when he decides to lose his virginity with a prostitute – because he is unable to find a girl he could feel romantic about, for the simple reason that she would invariably be phony. Taking pity on her, he decides that he would not be taking part in the male corruption around him: "'The thing is, I had an operation recently.' 'Yeah? Where?' 'On my wuddayacallit – my clavichord.' 'Yeah? Where the hell's that?' 'The clavichord?' I said. 'Well, actually, it's in the spinal canal. I mean it's quite a ways down in the spinal canal'" (86).

The explanation Holden gives is, of course, hilarious, taking advantage of the girl's ignorance and his dalliance with diseases is part of the miscommunication he has with just about all residents of New York. It also reads as an irony – since he is unable to communicate normally with the people he meets, he must have some sort of a medical condition. The illnesses Holden invents for himself can also be read as a mask he decides to wear following the growing realization that he cannot save the kids from making mistakes in life, and, more importantly, they themselves do not want to be saved.

The autofictions by comparison never treat the disease the writer is suffering from lightly. Nor is it a mask. It is always painfully real there and always transformative of the main protagonist allowing the readers to see him/her in a new light as a reminder to everyone that this could happen to us, too. The main protagonist in all examined autofictive writers is realistically and truly on the brink of death (the mentioned years of the deaths of the writers testify to this). Despite this fact, nowhere in the texts is despair to be found. Instead, we have a transcending humor, a real displacement or detachment of the narrator in the Bakhtinian sense of his «*отстранение*» who narrates from the perspective of the autofictional ailing self, but is, nevertheless, capable of seeing beyond, of imagining more, the writing selves acquiring a certain sense of transiting into another world while being, at the same

time, firmly immersed in the world of the characters struggling for their lives. We can also observe an acceptance of the inevitable by all, thus creating a certain writing standard for autofictive writers in World Literature who, through their texts, are taking their farewell with the world as we know it yet remaining convinced that there is more to life than this.

It would be a terrible understatement and an unforgivable cliché if we said that all examined writers have shown heroism in the face of imminent death, writing against the clock for it was as terrifying and real for Plath as it was for the others. Although she wrote in such detail about her depression in 1953, she was no less depressive 10 years later. Even more remarkable is the writer's stance – the masterful construction of the events, the social commentaries, the palimpsestic narrative which jocularly includes intertextuality with other works by her indirectly referenced by Esther. It is through this frolicsome winking at the reader and the unquestionable depth of the novel as regards culture, politics, and femininity that one could also argue that Plath is *never* truly depressive in her novel. There are so many layers of ironies accompanying the darkest of moments in it that we can clearly distinguish between Plath as a writer and Plath as a sufferer of depression – the clearly divided self of Esther Greenwood, which, as the analysis has shown, is further divided to other subselves, reflecting Plath's (Esther's) final loss of identity and disintegration – also observed through Guibert's account of Foucault's (Muzil's) last days. Further probing has revealed the deeper connections Plath feels she has with the Rosenbergs, an important realization which helps us to understand better her controversial "Daddy" and which, as was suggested in Chapter 1, may hold a clue to the enigmatic date of Plath's suicide.

In *The Bell Jar*, through her Esther, Plath reveals herself to be a young white American woman with a very strong stance as regards shameful acts of American internal and external politics. She desperately wants to blend in but at the same time is revolted by society when she takes a closer look inside. Her status of an overachiever allows her to see New York in all its dark nuances of a chaotic uninspiring environment in which the New Yorkers seem to be bent on taking an advantage of the newcomer with the only purpose to rob or to

rape. In this aspect, relations to Trump and Epstein would reveal that the achievements of the four feminist waves, that have had the effects of seismic waves, now remain an abstraction in certain underprivileged American environments – great initial impact and then gradual weakening of the force in the peripheral zones.

Plath's New York and Serghi's Bucharest have revealed strong reactions from both women writers as regards First- and Second-wave feminism, both demonstrating how young women remained underprivileged in 1920s/1930s Romania and 1950s USA. Both their heroines try to comply and improve the skills that are demanded of them, with Esther not trying too hard since she is aware that that would mean too much compliance and compromise. With disappointment setting in, both Esther and Diana find themselves in a state of depression, much more serious in Esther. Plath's harsh criticism of the ECT therapy is yet another solid proof that she managed to turn her lived experience into powerful literature, an important personal account of a decade, in certain ways not unlike the 1920s, that also came short of women's expectations.

By deciding to become the feminine chroniclers of their respective epochs as youths, both writers took an enormous risk, and this did not go without certain injuries. The choice of the first-person narrator even if masked by another name, once the identification with the writer herself has been established, could always be a source of controversy and literary sleuthing, given the notorious unreliability of this writing mode (often used for mock autobiographies). One point that needs to be addressed here is the perceived female victimization arising from these representations. This question is raised by Heather Clark who says with poignancy that "Since her suicide in 1963, Plath has become a paradoxical symbol of female power and helplessness whose life has been subsumed by her afterlife" (360). While the female angst with "Plath" as its badge does injustice to the American poet being reductionist of the live person she was, labeling Serghi a feminine writer in Romania worthy of doctoral dissertations on feminism does the woman equal harm. In both their novels they are never melodramatic, always remaining lucid and self-analytical. In that, they are critical of themselves and of others for not doing enough to change a society which only invited woman's victimhood.

CHAPTER 4: MARRIAGE AND ITS DISCONTENTS: THE ABANDONED WIFE – THE TRANSATLANTIC CONNECTION CONTINUED

Marriage for Sylvia Plath has remained arguably one of the most controversial topics both in her life and in the literature she produced. And there is nothing surprising about that since it remains a pivotal period for everyone who has made this important step not infrequently accompanied by misgivings, doubts, and regrets, also neatly synthesized in the English proverbs: "Marry in haste, repent at leisure" and "Marriage brings out the worst in people". The well-known Bulgarian one on the subject "One may live well, but eventually one ends up married", deriving from an inscription of the Bulgarian khan Omurtag, links marriage and death, as in marriage being the end of life as we know it. Here is the time to say that at first glance that does not seem to have been Plath's case – she never openly said that she regretted marrying Ted Hughes (in any of the available nonfiction sources), but in her fiction she did express her doubts retroactively. Consequently, an inattentive reader may miss Esther's own baby cameo scene (*BJ* 4) and be left with the impression that Plath had these moments before she got married – the moments from *The Bell Jar* where Esther fantasizes about marrying someone less fancy (*BJ* 139, 140). It is again in her novel and from the same perspective that Esther grimly views marriage as a "totalitarian state" and envisages herself "a brainwashed slave" (*BJ* 89). Her Elly Higginbottom humble alter ego, in many ways a truer to life self, if we consider the *Journals*, could have enjoyed marriage more, if a less glamorous person had been chosen for a husband (Chapter 3).

The *Journals* mainly eulogize the figure of Ted Hughes as Plath talks much about him and what he does – nothing out of the ordinary, everyday routines in which he is consistently revealed as a pleasant man to be with, as a sort of a house god whose grandeur is to be seen through the colorful gauze of feminine imagination. But even in this portrayal he comes out as aloof, perhaps too English to be truly seen for who he was. Also, the label *unabridged* to the *Journals* apparently does not

mean *untampered*. Jacqueline Rose, among others, strongly suggests that not only excisions were applied to that text, but also remarks were removed "on the grounds that they are not only 'damaging' but 'untrue'" (xii). Again, there we can see that Plath chooses to supplement the missing qualifying information with inventions of her own. In the 2007 edition there are numerous references to Hughes, and this part of the study will examine the representation of Plath's marriage and of marriage in general in her works – short stories, journals, letters, and key poems. Here it is the time to accentuate that while the *Letters*, in their 2017 edition contain information presenting Hughes in an unfavorable light, the *Journals* mostly do not and few of the poems do. We now know that Hughes himself excised the last years of the *Journals* as he declared he did not want his children to read them. Things are, however, not that simple and in examining the works at hand we will be interested, once again, in the different representation of lived experience we get from works that were meant to be published – the short stories and the poems, and those meant for the writer to have at her disposal and for her own perusal alone – the *Journals*. Attention will be paid to some of the letters as well in that they are lived experience meant to be shared with a specific addressee.

1. Honeymoon and early marriage in Plath and Serghi: the *Journals, Johnny Panic* and the *Poems* vs *The Spider's Web* – assenting and dissenting pronouns; the feminine imagination

This chapter, being a natural continuation of the previous one, will examine marriage in Plath and Serghi, which will allow for a more complete comparative study of the two epochs – the 1920s/1930s, Romania and 1950s, USA, underscoring the "abandoned wife" as presented by the wife herself with relevant commentaries based on analyzing Hughes's *Birthday Letters*.

1.1. Three sides to one story and the first signs that there was something wrong

Plath describes her honeymoon in a short story set in a small village near Alicante, Spain called Benidorm. It is quite remarkable that Plath proposes three versions of the same story – one in her *Journals*, the 15 July 1956 entry, and two in the *Johnny Panic* prose where one of them is almost identical to that from the *Journals* whereas the second

one from the prose collection is a conversion from the first-person narrator to the omniscient narrator. These modifications have allowed Plath to step aside from the lived experience in the story and attempt to see it with Bakhtin's detachment. The differences between the first two are cosmetic and are related to orthographics or slight changes of words, for example: "silvered sardines cost only 8 pesetas the kilo, and are heaped on the table, strewn with a few odd crabs, star-fish and shells" (*J* 239) vs "silvered sardines cost only eight pesetas the kilo, and are heaped on the table, strewn with a few odd crabs, starfish and squid" (*JP* 224). Another example will show how Plath writes obviously fast in her *Journals* and then has the orthography corrected in the *Johnny Panic* prose collection: "All cooking -- fresh sardines fried in oil, potato and onion tortillas, cafe con leche --- is done on the blue flame of an antique petrol burner" (*J* 240) vs "All cooking – fresh sardines fried in oil, potato-and-onion tortillas, *café con lèche* – is done on the blue flame of an antique petrol burner" (*JP* 224). Typically, foreign expressions used to preserve the local Mediterranean color appear without the right accents and unitalicized whereas this is righted in *Johnny Panic*, as in "terrifically comme il faut" (*J* 241) vs "terrifically *comme il faut*" (*JP* 224). These foreign but well-known phrases from Spanish and French, together with others from the same colloquial register, clearly indicate Englishness being positioned in Europe. In that, the first person non-conjugal 'I' becomes pluralized into the conjugal 'we' and so Hughes blends with Plath as a common undistinguishable plural subject. A comparison between these two versions will show the same orthographic differences of texts which are otherwise almost identical: "Senora seemed shocked that we did not carry knives, forks and spoons about with us, but brought out, finally, three elaborate place-settings of her best silver which she laid out, saying that this was only for the three of us, and she would soon go to Alicante to buy some simple kitchen silver for us and put her best silver away" (*J* 241) vs "Señora seemed shocked that we did not carry knives, forks and spoons about with us, but brought out, finally, three elaborate place settings of her best silver, which she laid out, saying that this was only for the three of us, and she would soon go to Alicante to buy some simple kitchen silver for us and put her best silver away" (*JP* 225). As one reads on, apart from these insignificant differences between the two versions, the consistent

authoritative English 'we' of the narrator in both contrasts with various appellations referring to their host: "Señora", "the Widow Mangada", "the witch". It should also be noted that the "we" subject in the story is categorically feminized – we feel that Sylvia has the initiative of the agency in everything that they do together, and Ted only agrees, thus producing an assenting English 'we' (common assent without arguments or discussions) as opposed to the foreign dissenting 'she' in the host. This presentation by Plath certainly raises questions. The common pronoun seems to indicate a summarized version of the events with possible omissions of dissent on part of the masculine part of "we". Or it may suggest that Ted Hughes was uninterested in any of these common matters, so he just nodded his agreement. The Widow Mangada in all versions of the story is presented as peevish, petty, and dishonest in her dealings with the newly wedded writers – promising them that they will have the much-needed peace and quiet so they can write while filling the villa with other tourists. Her claims to a nobler and more aristocratic past where she did not have to work are also questioned. The interactions between the Hughes and the host, resulting in the broken promises of the latter, become unbearable for the writers and so they finally decide to move. I will analyze some of these by examining only the story in the *Johnny Panic* collection identical with the one in the *Journals* and will then discuss differences with the conversion to the omniscient narrator.

An example of this fight for private space is the following rendition: "We held our breath and wished fervently that she would have no customers when she put up the sign APARTMENTS FOR RENT on our balcony terrace. We had, at least made sure that she would not use our balcony, which adjoined another, larger room, as a selling point, by explaining that it was the only place we could write in peace" (*JP* 226). Their hopes for not having other vacationers are based on the rather primitive conditions: "We had fun hazarding on the objections they might make: no hot water, one small bathroom, only an antique petrol burner. With such modern hotels in town, probably her price was too high: what wealthy people would be willing to market and cook? Who but poor students & writers like us?" (*JP* 226). The host has other secrets, too, as regards the tap water: "She burbled on evasively about the health-giving quantities of the water, and it was a full day before I

caught her drawing up a pail of it from a cistern sunk deep in the kitchen, covered by a blue board. The tap water, it turned out, was *non potable*" (*JP* 226). Here we see, for the first time, the appearance of the 'I' narrator that breaks away from the 'we'. As it can be expected, it is Plath herself who is interested in finding out more about the host in an initiative that obviously had nothing to do with Hughes. Despite the impositions made by the host that they are to keep all common premises and utilities "*propre"*, which results in some more daily expenses for the Hughes spent on "petrol and matches" (*JP* 227), the Señora washes "her greasy dishes in standing cold water" (*JP* 228). Differences between the 'I' narrator and Ted begin to emerge. It is invariably Sylvia who makes revealing discoveries attesting to the host's growing meanness with an apathetic indifferent Ted who simply corroborates her findings: "Sleepily, Ted came down in his bathing trunks to turn the switch. There was another blue flash; no sound. He tried the light switch. No electricity. We pounded on the Señora's door. No answer. 'She's either gone out or dead,' I said" (*JP* 228). It seems Ted was largely unconcerned with the petty side of married life and everyday activities, which could arguably be called a masculine behavior, with Silvia being the feminine pragmatic inquisitive side of it. One would say that they were nicely complementing each other, but this also suggests Ted's overall lack of concern with his marriage and the complementary aura of the marriage, just an illusion.

The conflict over mundane matters making their stay problematic results in an all-out verbal war between the two women – the 'I' narrator and the host: "No light,' she exclaimed triumphantly, as if all were solved. 'It is so in all the village.' 'This is usual in the morning?' I asked coldly. '*Pas de tout, de tout, de tout*,' she rattled off from under raised eyebrows, apparently just noticing my cool irony" (*JP* 228). Eventually, the 'I' narrator starts seeing the host as a witch and here the three represented personalities are well distinguished: "she came back and tossed in a handful of powder, which fizzed and foamed. I asked her what it was, but she just chuckled and said she had been cooking a lot longer than I and knew some '*petite choses*.' Magic powder, I thought. Poison. 'Bicarbonate of soda,' Ted reassured" (*JP* 228).

Plath offers another account of the honeymoon events in the story entitled "That Widow Mangada" where Ted is called Mark and she is

Sally, and they are both American. Here there are many changes to the original, but not the story line or the main events in it. One of these changes is that Mark (Ted) has received additional linguistic skills, he also has become much more interested in his own marriage affairs: "Mark's Spanish was fluent; he was translating some modern Spanish poetry that summer for an anthology" (*JP* 230). All in all, the story presents Hughes the way Plath would have liked him to be although she adored him the way he was, but evidently there was a part of her that would have wished him to be more mannered and interested in their life together. The story curiously presents Mark and Sally as two equally concerned by both their marriage and stay at the widow's villa. Also, they have real conversations which account for some of the 'we' decisions and actions in the other two versions. The "witch" attributes to the widow and the whole arrangement, revealed at the end of the other two versions as a logical denouement, here are presented at the beginning of their stay but differently – in a visual-verbal manner: "She gave them a blinding smile, displaying a row of large, protruding yellow teeth. 'I will treat you like my own son and daughter" (*JP* 233) reminiscent of the witch receiving Hansel and Gretel, especially with the rather formal relationship between the spouses in the story, devoid of sexual intimacy.

Mark's interest in their daily existence takes something of Sylvia's detective curiosity and we can observe him making comments questioning some of the actions of the widow: "I still think there's something queer [odd] about her being a landlady after all the talk of the noble birth and university degrees and her brilliant dead doctor husband she gave us over lunch" (*JP* 234). In an interesting tinge of the story, Mark is the one who is much more prejudiced against the host than Sally and overall, this leads to an English stereotyping for foreignness while Sally partially preserves Plath's American benefit of the doubt for what we do not know: "Don't let that fancy tinsel fool [the widow's claim she wrote poetry],' Mark cautioned. 'She probably writes horrid Spanish love stories for the pulp magazines" (*JP* 234).

Although this version contains all the important events from the other two, here the host is made even more unpleasant in her meanness and double-dealing while Mark is much more active and interested in their being a couple and everything that concerns their life together. He

is also much more belligerent when they have to stand their ground. Also, Plath's experience with ECT is emphasized in both *Johnny Panic* versions: "I tiptoed down the stone stairs to turn on the peculiar machine with odd blue-painted spigots and wires jutting out which the Señora had said 'made water,' turning the switch the day before, upon which there was a convincing rumble as some complicated machinery started up. I turned the switch; there was a blue flash and acrid smoke began pouring from the box" (*JP* 227). As a result, the experience leaves the 'I' narrator "smoldering" (*JP* 227). The omniscient narrator version renders this moment almost verbatim but with a somewhat stronger effect: "Sally tiptoed downstairs in the still house. The kitchen was darkly shuttered. Opening the shutters, Sally regarded the blue box mistrustfully, with its odd blue spigots and frayed wires. She had a blind respect for electricity. Bracing herself, she pulled the lever. A flash of blue sparks shot from the box, and a thin column of acrid smoke began twisting from the heart of the machine" (*JP* 236). The short-circuited cable producing the *blue flash* is a painful memory and reminder of the ECT also found in *The Bell Jar*: "Then something leapt out of the lamp in a blue flash and shook me till my teeth rattled" (*BJ* 152). In "Lesbos" we have "blue sparks" that are spilling (*CP* 228) in a nightmarish hell-kitchen. Plath's reactions to cooking and electricity certainly bear the sign of trauma.

It merits also to compare the other versions' rendition of the "absent Widow" scene. We have "We pounded on the Señora's door. No answer. 'She's either gone out or dead,' I said" (*JP* 228) vs "Mark knocked on the door. He called the Widow. The house was deathly still except for the grandfather clock in the hall, ticking like a coffined heart. 'Maybe she's dead in there,' Sally said. 'I have the strangest feeling there's nobody breathing behind that door'" (*JP* 237). The second version introduces an E. A. Poe element – *the coffined heart*, a possible reference to his hugely influential "The Tell-Tale Heart" and is again much more sinister in its overall connotations and references to both Plath's lived experience with doctors and Poe, with the reproduced sensation that the heart in Poe's story somehow lives on its own – pounding through the flooring after the old man has been smothered by the mattress in his room. By reference, the witch from the other versions here acquires the unsettling representation of the uncanny old man with

his "evil eye". Although the two writers (Plath and Hughes) certainly do not wish her dead, at least because they need her to help them with the bizarre appliances and idiosyncratic arrangement of the house, they can joke about her death, the joke being initiated by Plath (Sally), who, in this version is also the more morbid of the two spouses, but it is Mark (Ted) who verbalizes the overwhelming sensations that the widow is a witch: "We've probably got in with the village witch" (*JP* 239). This perception is augmented by the widow's presentation of some new guests to the villa: "Carried away by her own speech, the Widow began to sway her plump little body to and fro dramatically, acting it all out in a sort of pantomime. 'They come in late at night. And their children cry. It is very natural'" (*JP* 241). Still more details are added to that effect also linking the widow to a nonsensical Lewis Carroll character: "The Widow disappeared from the kitchen with a dazzling false grin, which Sally felt lingering on as she finished preparing the meal, disquieting as the smile of the Cheshire cat" (*JP* 241). When there is no one around, "the other rooms were hushed and darkened as in a hospital. Sally shut the door behind them. The sound echoed sepulchrally" (*JP* 241). On their leaving the villa the host identifies as a witch once again: "She began trembling, as if shaken in the teeth of a high wind. 'After all I've done for you! After I gave you the balcony…' Her voice frayed to a coarse squawk" (*JP* 247). Here we also find Mark (Ted) taking a menacing position defending his wife's action: "'I ask my wife to manage household affairs,' he cut the Widow off firmly. 'I'm ready to stand behind everything she's said'" (*JP* 247).

Although the omniscient narrator should also be detached and not taking sides, here is easily identified with Sally and Mark, in the inseparable 'we', by allowing them to have all the gloating ironies at the expense of the host as in the other two versions. As a result of the poorly masked narrator, many more elements from Plath's hospital experiences also creep into the narrative, even into the ending where the highly unusual adjective *malignant* is used to describe the surrounding hills (*JP* 249). All in all, the effects of mystery and terror which consistently pile up, especially in the *Johnny Panic* version of the story, are neither dispelled, nor confirmed, which *does* make the host a mystery and the effects rather boutaphoric. The newlyweds seem

to be playing a children's game of guessing with all riddles remaining unanswered.

The story, which is the only one to be found in three versions in Plath, just like certain pieces discussed in the previous chapters which exist in two versions, attests to what Rose calls the "extraordinary generosity" (x) with which Plath allows us to peek into the workings of her mind. As a representation of two American (anglophone) spouses on a honeymoon in the Mediterranean, it might have been considered funny in the 1950s. As a travelogue in Spain, it wonderfully reconstructs for us Benidorm from the 1950s – Plath has provided drawings which match paintings of the place from the epoch. One may find it comparable to Gerald Durrell's amazing representation of the Greek island of Corfu of the 1930s as well as the culture shocks for both sides – English and Greek in his trilogy about his family living there. This representation in Plath, just like in Durrell to some extent, comes at a cost – the English are wonderfully exempt from understanding and complying with local mores – after all, the travelers speak English. Everyone else speaks broken English and that reproduction in such travelogues, including Durrell's books, is supposed to be very funny. From a modern perspective, however, apart from the preserved local flair of the times, in Plath it is marked by an unforgivable lack of self-irony and presence of glaring self-righteousness, without a single redeeming quality of "that Widow Mangada". And here what matters is that Plath, having captured the atmosphere of the place so well, has not captured much of the character of the Spanish woman, that is, she comes out as a grotesque caricature the right of which to exist as such in the story is neither proven nor disproven. For example, when the spouses learn that she also writes poetry, they do not really want to see that poetry although in the omniscient narrator version Mark speaks Spanish fluently and should be able to understand and evaluate it, but it is him that dismisses the poems, without having seen them, as *torrid love stories*. These (post)colonial attitudes from the 1950s are not hard to understand and Plath wrote about the Spanish not very differently from Heller about the Italians in his *Catch 22* from the early 1950s, not dissimilar to Durrell's portrayal of the Greeks in the late 1930s, albeit with an updated more modern 1950s attitude. Again, this condescending disdainful attitude in Plath here is very different from

her own in *The Bell Jar* where she irreproachfully portrays *otherness* in the Russian translator Constantin, but we need to consider the fact that the reconstructed times in Plath's novel are of the year 1953 from the perspective of 1963 while the short story in question was written in 1956 and represents the same year. Just like Dubarova's "Jealousy" (1979), this is not a short story Plath could be very proud of now, but in these short-story representations of *dark* ladies we must give credit to both women writers for doing it as a one-off thing. Still, with great power comes great responsibility – brandishing the language of representation as a weapon compromises the quality of the travelogue raising ethical issues as discussed at length in *Travel and Ethics* edited by Corinne Fowler, Charles Forsdick and Ludmilla Kostova. There, the editors, while providing an overview of travel writing, remind us that it involves "the ethical and political responsibility to the other" (6) and suggest that postcolonial representations of *otherness* could be "less culturally arrogant and complicit with prevailing political orthodoxies" (4). The main responsibility, as they correctly point out, is the role of the travel writer of "a kind of a historian" (6) – he or she is the creator of the represented *otherness*. At that, Plath succeeds on the level of presenting the landscape – comparable to paintings of the place during those times; unsurprisingly, she was very good at drawing.

Plath's *Journal* entries of her honeymoon are numerous, and they portray her "Spanish summer" in Benidorm as a wonderful place and time with a true relish in describing everyday family routines, indulging in a vivid colorful reproduction of the locals and surroundings as a backdrop, still occasionally tarnished by a racist commentary or qualification, but we should be reminded once again that the *Journals* were never meant to be published. Here is an example of excellent travel writing, following their moving from Widow Mangada's villa to 59 Tomas Ortunio, Benidorm, so on 22 July 1956 Plath wrote the following:

> Every morning and evening we hear the bells which herald the herd of elegant stepping black goats; yesterday I saw children clustering around the barn where one of the goats was being milked. Saturday market is the fullest of the week. Ted and I went about 8:30, the earliest we've been yet, and found all fresh and crowded and thriving, which abashed us for the lazy days we'd arrived at noon to find dried, withered

> vegetables. Every stand was loaded with produce, and as we passed, the saleswomen hawked their wares, crying out apples and peppers. For daring, we bought part of a large yellow summer squash (which I'd never cooked) called a calabash, I think, and two shiny purple vegetables which I imagined might be called zucchini, but not being sure, shall try to cook today according to zucchini recipe […] Our new house is magnificent. We keep marveling that we bought it for the summer at the same price Widow Mangada was charging for her noisy small room, bad dirty bathroom, ant [sic] infested kitchen (all to be shared with "les autres", the piggy Spaniards) and terrace overlooking the sea (the honking staring gawking crowds on the boulevard, rather) which turned out to be the worst, not the best, feature (*J* 247-8).

Plath's *Journals* as just exemplified, are fascinating, widely acclaimed for a reason, and they completely transport us into different times and places. It should be noted that Plath evidently loved traveling and she had a keen sense for describing unfamiliar lands and customs – she provides such descriptions of England and Cambridge as well. Her depictions of Mediterranean Spain are among her best, and, as already mentioned, she also had a sense of what was to be published and what not – *les autres* as a colorful expression, used by the widow menacingly, is present in the *Johnny Panic* story, but without the phrase that follows it in the brackets which mars a world-class travel depiction and which Plath removed herself in the respective short story in all three versions. Still, although we get a clear sensation of the flavor of spending time in Benidorm, Plath falls into the "sedentary" (Islam 11) type of travelers, the ones who despite their movement through foreign spaces remain untouched by the new cultural environment and who colonize the narrative of the travelogue by telling us how that culture can be adapted to the traveler's needs, technically the Robinson Crusoe type, not the Gulliver type who can be considered ethically receptive, being *gullible* and open to new perceptions, dwelling in his or her traveling. As Corinne Fowler indicates the anglophone tradition could be considered "more colonial than its Francophone and Spanish-language counterparts" (52) and Plath's account of Benidorm seems to confirm that statement. Above all, as it is, Plath would like to reflect on her time spent with Ted as newlyweds. The first signs that there was something amiss in their marriage appear as early as her entry marked *Benidorm: July 23 (continued)*:

> Alone, deepening. Feeling the perceptions deepen with the tang of geranium and the full moon and the mellowing of the hurt, the deep ingrowing of the hurt, too far from the bitching fussing surface tempests. The hurt going on, clean as a razor, and the dark blood welling. Just the sick knowing that the wrongness was growing in the full moon. Listening, he scratches his chin, the small rasp of a beard. He is not asleep. He must come out, or there is no going in. Up the hilly street come the last donkey carts from the village, families going home up the mountain, slow, the donkey bells jangling. A couple of laughing girls. A skinny little boy with a lean dog on a leash. A French-speaking family. A mother with a fussing white-lace frilled baby. Dark and quiet, completely still then under the full moon. A cricket somewhere. Then there is his warmth, so loved, and strange, and the drawing in to the room where wrongness is growing. Wrongness grows in the skin and makes it hard to touch (*J* 251).

The text is highly poetic and rife with unspoken but strongly suggested sense of evil and darkness. The *wrongness*, impossible to pinpoint in the passage, is popping up from everywhere. In the text Plath accepts that Hughes could be dead, just like the probability that she might be murdered, possibly by him. Plath's *Journals* often read as exceptional short stories with expressive poetic language where each word is used to a maximum effect. It becomes clear that the darkness, additionally added to the discussed short story, was an aftereffect of reworking the original text. Consequently, the witchy aura of the Spanish woman, one could safely presume, was all part of Plath's vivid imagination, as was, undoubtedly, her seeing the moon, when she was a child, as "a witch's hair" shared by her mother, Aurelia. Could it be that the same transfiguration of the moon was also at work in the scene above and so spelled "murder"? Many of the things Plath said have turned out to be prophetic, many others are still open to interpretation, which, as we can rest assured by Rose, is "endless" (ix). Although the renowned critic speaks of a "literary work" (ix), and here we have a journal entry, Plath's literariness is overwhelming even in her *Journals* and *Letters*. Arguably, thus she saw even more clearly, but certainly this was not always a high-quality photograph. Sometimes it was just that, sometimes a sketchy drawing, sometimes a surrealist painting. Always it was exceptional.

Still, from his *Birthday Letters* Hughes strikes a discordant chord with Plath's poetic bitter-sweet depictions of her honeymoon. In the poem "You Hated Spain" he accuses Plath of being inadequate, frightened by everything unknown, not knowing how to deal with the locals: "Bosch/ Held out a spidery hand and you took it/ Timidly, a bobby-sox American" (39). He also writes: "I see you, in moonlight,/ Walking the empty wharf at Alicante/ Like a soul waiting for the ferry,/ A new soul, still not understanding,/ Thinking it is still your honeymoon/ In the happy world, with your whole life waiting,/ Happy, and all your poems still to be found" (40). Somehow Hughes suggests that as early as the honeymoon he knew their marriage was not meant to be, with his bride being different from him, unable to fully connect to the world around them, unable to see him for who he was. However, even in his criticism Hughes admits to Plath's capacity of "imprisoning" (44) the place in the poem "Drawing" in recognition of her widely acknowledged mastery of the art (Hedley 158).

One feels tempted to quote endlessly from Plath's representations of Benidorm and despite Hughes's harsh commentary from 1998 on Plath's portrayal of the event and period one can argue that what Plath has done for the small Spanish village, now a town, Serghi did for Balchik. The Romanian author's descriptions are equally amazing world-class achievements in travel writing although with her it is part of a novel and so Balchik, as already mentioned, is her writing at her utmost modernist. A major difference from Serghi's presentation of Michi, Diana's husband, is that Plath's presentations of Ted through his literary avatars (including the *Journals*) almost always reflect her adoration, worshipping, even genuflection at the altar of a god because Plath loved everything in him and could forgive all he did or would do to her, despite the jealousy scenes.

1.2. Marriage and love in English and American poetry – the feminine perspective

In both English and American literatures there are classic examples of women poets writing lovingly of their husbands. A very early example is Anne Bradstreet from the North American Colonies who wrote in the 17th century and came up with poems such as "Another I" and "Another II" (272-4), "To My Dear and Loving Husband" (270)

and "A Letter to Her Husband" (271). Being a puritan, she considered marriage very important, and her poems express infinite love for her husband and sensation of loss when he is not around. In them she has lines of gratitude, longing and grief as in "Another I", "Commend me to the man more loved than life;/ Show him the sorrows of his widowed wife" (272). "Another II" continues in the same vein with animalistic similes signaling a symbolic absence of the beloved: "The absence of her love and loving mate/ Whose loss hath made her so unfortunate […]/ Or as the loving mullet, that true fish,/ Her fellow lost nor joy nor life doth wish" (274). In "To My Dear and Loving Husband" Bradstreet creates a true all-time classic of a loving wife featuring lines of family unity and marriage *par excellence* such as: "If ever two were one, then surely we;/ If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;/ If ever wife was happy in a man,/ Compare with me, ye women, if you can" (270) and also the desire for everlasting love between the spouses: "Thy love is such I can no way repay; The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray./ Then while we live in love let's so persevere/ That when we live no more we may live ever" (270). In "A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment", Bradstreet weaves some more memorable lines celebrating a wife's fidelity where the lyrical 'I' becomes the true lighthouse beacon for the husband far away, similar to Dickinson's marine navigation symbolics in "Wild Nights": "If thou be one, as surely thou and I./ How stayest thou there, whilst I at Ipswich lie? –/ […] My chilléd limbs now numbéd lie forlorn;/ Return, return, sweet Sol, from Capricorn!" (271).

Elizabeth Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in the mid-19th century England is the most remarkable collection in Western Europe of a woman writing a sequence of 44 love sonnets dedicated to the love for her husband. Initially, just like the Brontës, Elizabeth Browning, being their contemporary, thought of pretending that the poems were not her own but were translated from Bosnian. It was at Robert Browning's insistence, her husband, that she published them with her name attached to them as the author since, as he claimed, those were the best sonnets in English since Shakespeare. E. Browning's sonnets are philosophical with a clear woman's stance of veiled audacity, deceptive demureness and professed deference before the masculine "thou" and "thee". In some of them certain quoted lines from

Bradstreet seem to resurface reformulated as an expression of universal feminine desire. For example, Bradstreet's direct: "Commend me to the man more loved than life" (272) to what the Victorian poet felt unutterable by a woman: "Nay, let the silence of my womanhood commend my woman-love to thy belief" (214), Sonnet XIII. Sonnet XIV is also exceptionally beautiful with memorable lines such as: "If thou must love me, let it be for nought/ except for love's sake only. Do not say/ 'I love her for her smile .. her look .. her way/ of speaking gently, .. for a trick of thought" (214), Sonnet XIV. The same sonnet reaffirms the power of Bradstreet's ending couplet: "Then while we live in love let's so persevere/ That when we live no more we may live ever" (270) vs Browning's "But love me for love's sake, that evermore/ Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity" (214). In both women poets there is the expressed desire that men will be immortalized through the everlasting love for the women, with the remark that Bradstreet insists on the mutual participation in this act of love while Browning urges her husband to do so for him to become immortal – aspire to be the God who has deigned to love an earthly woman, but whose grandeur can be truly seen in that act.

The confirmation sought after by women that men's love for them be reiterated is present in Browning's sonnets. For instance, in Sonnet XXI she begins: "Say over again, and yet once over again,/ That thou dost love me" (218). In Sonnet XXIII Browning questions the place she occupies for her beloved, expressing the hope that her presence around him would make his life more beautiful and pleasant, writing the exceptional: "Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead,/ Would'st thou miss any life in losing mine?/ And would the sun for thee more coldly shine[…]/ I am thine –/ But .. *so* much to thee? Can I pour thy wine/ While my hands tremble?" (219-220). In this powerful sonnet Browning insists yet again on being reassured by her beloved that she is loved by him and then she can say: "yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange/ My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!" (220). In this sonnet Browning aptly interweaves an archetypal ritualistic interaction with the beloved as an irresistible argument for his loving her so she can make her choice between earthly life and life in heaven. As the sonnets advance in number, they also advance in boldness. For example, Sonnet XXIX is but a flimsy Victorian cloak for carnal love:

"I think of thee! – my thoughts do twine and bud/ About thee, as wild vines, about a tree" (223) in an encoded reproduction of an all-encompassing female embrace of the beloved male who remains in a phallus-like immobile projection or *erection* while she takes the form of a *vulva* with the *clitoris* compared to the stimulated bud. In Sonnet XXXIX, the lyrical 'I' recognizes that she is wearing a mask poorly disguising her carnal desires for the beloved man, so she says: "Because thou hast the power and own'st the grace/ To look through and behind this mask of me" (228). It is in Sonnet XLIII that Browning's aspirations to all-conquering love crystalize into a summary: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" (231), finishing with: "I love thee with the breath,/ Smiles, tears, of all my life! – and, if God choose,/ I shall but love thee better after death" (231). One could argue that by using a literary sexual code E. Browning could be more erotic than the more sexually explicit writers before or after her, as would be Daniel Defoe with *Moll Flanders* and D. H. Lawrence with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

The natural successor of Elizabeth Browning was Christina Rossetti, sister of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She, like her brother, is linked with the Pre-Raphaelite movement in poetry and art. Influenced by Ann Radcliffe, Walter Scott, John Keats, and Matthew Lewis, she wrote powerful poetry which is more modern than Browning's and overwhelmingly more melancholic. Even though she did not write about a husband, her love poetry is influential and covers various masculine addressees – from Jesus Christ to an anonymous lover.

A sonnet called "If Only" reads as a response to Browning's Sonnet XXIII and begins thus: "If I might only love my God and die!/ But now He bids me love Him and live on,/ Now when the bloom of all my life is gone" (51), finishing with "Yea, they shall wax who now are on the wane,/ Yea, they shall sing for love when Christ shall come" (51). The relationship between the lyrical 'I' and Christ exceeds the purely religious devoutness, which is revealed in the line "my God". It can be read as Depeche Mode's "My Personal Jesus" or it can be the man behind Jesus Christ, not the "maid, and shapen as a man" (Chaucer 182) from "The Wife of Bath's Tale". The resurrection of the spirit with the advent of Christ can be read as the personal God each woman finds in her man. One of the most memorable poems Ch. Rossetti wrote,

another sonnet, was "Remember" (102) which could read as an address to a lover or a husband in which she urges the beloved not to be sad after she is gone. In a completely modern English language and sound, the poem reads as a strong expression of the self-denial and self-effacement that only women are capable of in the following remarkable opening lines: "Remember me when I am gone away,/ Gone far away into the silent land; When you can no more hold me by the hand,/ Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay" (102).

Emphasizing on the significance of the beautiful memory, Rossetti suggests that inevitably one of the two persons in a couple always departs first and then the other one is left with the memory. The sonnet also clearly indicates that the lyrical 'I', the woman will be the first to go. The poem becomes transcendental in its insistence on the moments of hesitance in their relationship or the masculine dominance of making *their* plans while the woman seems to be on a threshold between two worlds. As the text strongly suggests, that was all vanity, but if the beloved felt good doing so, if he got a purpose in life out of that, then that was the appropriate thing to do. Not wishing him to be sad, the lyrical 'I' renounces on the memory of herself as the only vestige of a past life together as yet another manifestation of vanity in the ecclesiastical sense. This love poem, like most of Rossetti's works, is profoundly religious, even though we nowhere have the name or figure of Christ. He is incorporated in every line of it which announces yet another denial and sacrifice of the feminine self.

Much more religious than Plath, especially towards the end of her life, and a modern poetry influencer for her, was her contemporary and friend Anne Sexton. Also, much more overtly confessional than Plath, Sexton would write about both her husband and her evolving attitude towards him as well as her evolving promiscuity among many other "unacceptable" themes (Chapters 1, 2), getting to the point that her posthumous publication in 1976 of her poem collection *45 Mercy Street* had to see certain poems removed by Linda Sexton the inheritor to Sexton's poetic legacy, as she mentions it in the "Editor's Note" to the first edition (480) due to people affected. Anne Sexton's husband did not make his appearance into her poetry until 1962 in the poem "Doors, Doors, Doors" from the collection *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) where Sexton speaks of "my husband's insane abuse" (80) and where

she explains her erratic behavior so Plath could not have used any ideas from Sexton in that aspect in 1956 but could have used them in her late poetry.

1.3. An early poem about Ted Hughes – writing against the tradition

A poem by Plath that merits the attention from this period is "Ode for Ted". Dated *21 April 1956*, it was written before their marriage on 16 June 1956. For this poem Plath chose the ode as a genre which links her with the Romantic tradition of English literature where this was a serious mode of writing eulogies. Best known from the 19th century are Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" about spring as the revolution, as well as Keats's major odes – "to a Nightingale", "on a Grecian Urn", "on Melancholy", and "to Psyche". But even within this serious handling of the content, Keats himself had his "Ode on Indolence" (1819) which although philosophical, shows the possibility of parody even in the highest literary genres of a respective literary period in the same way as Shakespeare parodied himself and the sonnet form – Sonnet 130 and generally in the swarthy lady cycle of the sonnets. Plath's portrayal of Ted in this comic poem is rather lighthearted, trying to reveal him as a good-hearted ruler of the woods. The American poet employs an *abcddc* sextet rhyme scheme which changes accordingly with other rhymes but has the same pattern in the subsequent stanzas and roughly corresponds to the so called "Infant Joy" rhyme scheme used by William Blake in his *Songs of Innocence* (1789). In that her poem is very different from the rhyme scheme used by Keats for his odes and which is *abab cde cde* for each stanza, iambic pentameter alternating with a trimeter. As a result, we have the solemn Romantic genre as developed by Keats and Shelley, but the comic rhyme scheme pattern borrowed from Blake. Overall, this has produced a parody of an ode which means that it should not be taken very seriously, but still, it is an ode, or a comic ode to be exact, a confirmation of Plath's ironic and humoristic engagement with classical sources (Ranger 41).

In the poem Ted is the unrecognized ruler of the forest – that is, the animals know it, but the people do not with a single exception, and this can be seen in the following lines: "From under crunch of my man's boot/ green oat-sprouts jut;/ he names a lapwing, starts rabbits in a rout/

legging it most nimble/ to sprigged hedge of bramble,/ stalks red fox, shrewd stoat" (29). The final stanza continues in the same line announcing to the world his universal accolade in the world of the animals: "Ringdoves roost well within his wood,/ shirr songs to suit which mood/ he saunters in; how but most glad/ could be this adam's woman/ when all earth his words do summon/ leaps to laud such man's blood!" (29-30). So, the poem ends upon Plath's declaring herself joyful and pleased with him (*the adam's woman* in small letters). The poem has some other interesting aspects to note – the archaic words used by Plath, most of them moderately alliterated and heavily assonanced, produce a sonorous effect of Hughes wading through the woods in his boots and link him to an old English hunting tradition dating back to the Middle Ages. As such, the poem is a certain curtsey to both Hughes the Englishman and Hughes the poet who used heavily symbolic animalistic themes in his poetry.

As illustrated by Plath's *Journal* entries, short story and poem, Ted as an early character of Plath's works has a rather positive aura, his dark side is also hinted at since Plath was obviously quick to notice such things and being a writer had strong powers of observation. The different modes of life writing employed by Plath portray him differently. It is the *Journals* that seem to be the closest to the real-life figure of the English poet, if we compare them to the opinions about him expressed in Chapter 1 whereas the short story and the poem turn him into a literary character. Still, they allow us to see other traits and facets of Ted Hughes which may not be found in the *Journals*, but which could have been seen in life and probably not only by Plath.

1.4. Honeymoon and early marriage in Serghi's *The Spider's Web:* the ethics of Romanian autofiction and the problem of authenticity

Cella Serghi's story is well reflected in *The Spider's Web*. She was a student of Law when she married the engineer Alfino Seni (Michi). It was in 1927 when the blonde beauty, with a Greta Garbo look, met Camil Petrescu (Alex/ Petre) at the Kiseleff *ștrand* in Bucharest. For the young woman it was love at first sight, as was for Silvia when she met Ted at Cambridge. However, for Petrescu the only twenty-one-year-old Cella, when he met her again one year later,

already married, was rather a curiosity and although attracted to her, he did not make the decisive step to claim her for his wife. He seems to have been interested more in her husband from whom he got scientific explanations and with whom he often played backgammon, so he could be closer to Cella, but he was sadly incapable of the spectacular Romantic act of Gatsby who challenges openly Tom Buchanan in Fitzgerald's all-time classic and cries out to the world that Daisy must be his and his alone. So, in her *Memories* Serghi bemoans Petrescu's irresoluteness: "But it was not enough for me. I would have liked this man to slam shut the backgammon board with a sound that would make the walls crumble and say to his face: 'This can't go on anymore! I want her to be mine, my wife!' If he is not capable of a definitive decisive gesture, that must mean he doesn't love me!" (51-2). Still, in that she was mistaken for Petrescu would show her tenderness but would never make the step that could not leave any doubts in anyone. This also becomes one of the central questions in *The Spider's Web* verbalized by Ilinka Dima (Diana Slavu's confidante and alter ego): "If he loved her, why didn't he have her?", referring to C. Petrescu's Janus-faced fictional self – Petre Barbu/ Alex Dobrescu. In *Memories*, Serghi admits to being well versed in the courtship habits and love games of the epoch: "Despite all my disengagement, coquetry and even frivolity which I exhibited, I had before my husband Charlotte's (Lotte's) scruples for her fiancé. But Camil was no Young Werther" (49). A light over this enigma is also provided by Sebastian who says of Petrescu in a conversation with Serghi: "Listen to me! Camil lives for his literary works. Women have the power to change a man's destiny, especially if the man is an artist" (Serghi 73).

What did not happen in real life – the consummation of their love – happens in the novel through the second projection of the masculine self (Alex), but he still will not have her for a wife, which remains Serghi's lifelong regret. In *Memories*, she says:

> Camil would sometimes look at me as if I were on the other bank of a river, at other times he seemed poised to hold me in his arms. He would tease me for a moment, start playing with me, torture me and take me apart as if I were a plaything, so he would know all my cogs and wheels, and they could be his. But he, not theirs, not mine, no one's. He is not even afraid, not on the defensive. He is sure of himself, sure and a tad

> ironic. Sure, and a tad sad. Like a man in front of a shop window, admiring a jewel that fascinates him. He would like to have it but knows too well that it is not possible. He is separated by a shop window, that is a whole world. In his eyes – pain and rage. There is also something there inebriating and good. He will leave the shop window with a slight nostalgia. He has other things to do. The world is big. Not like a shop window. But for me the earth has shrunk. Only as big as to take him in. The world is all him (27-8).

With *The Spider's Web* written, one of the first readers of the manuscript was Camil Petrescu himself, who in his *Daily Notes* (*Note zilnice*) wrote:

> I've read to this late hour – two am, the novel typed on Cella S's machine. It contains a richness of detail, sensibility and authenticity that exceeds by a good margin all I could have expected this year from her… It is, regardless, mediocre due to her lack of culture, it is full of gaffes from which one (out of hundreds upon hundreds) would bury a book… Regardless, it is a material which, slightly worked over (it would have been easy for me if I had had the time), would have yielded a very successful piece of work (Serghi 264).

Like Plath's highly confessional *Ariel*, Serghi's novel also received initial criticism and by no other than Serghi's beloved. Petrescu reproaches Serghi for not having transformed the autobiographical material into a more recognizable literary form in terms of producing fiction as Sebastian was to do with his *Journal* entries about Balchik which he masterfully transformed into Balchik of the memory in his *The Accident*[73]. Sebastian was to write an autofictional novel himself – *For Two Thousand Years* (*De două mii de ani*) (1934), which created a controversy with the portrayal of the Jews in Romania, one of whom was the author himself, and what Serghi terms "the perceived irritating usage of the 'I' pronoun" (138). What Petrescu could not recognize then was that Cella Serghi had created an autofictional masterpiece with a wealth of ethnographic detail, insights into the life and mores of 1920s and 1930s Romania, a modern *bildungsroman* which nowadays can only be an important milestone for modern spinoffs both in the novel of development and autofiction. What he would have appreciated more would have been what he did in his

[73] Also discussed in *The Different Dobruja* (92-128). – a. n.

classic *The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War* with Serghi's precious advice on women's fashion and feminine psychology which Petrescu used for creating a more authentic representation of women. The goal was authenticity in fiction, without turning it into autofiction or writing from experience in such a manner that it would be unrecognizable – autofiction in disguise. In his essay "Originality and Authenticity" (*Originalitate și autenticitate*) Eliade examines the two principles, if originality presupposes individuality, authenticity is guaranteed by universality, so he says: "Telling a personal experience does not mean using a certain formula. It means expressing and thinking in facts. The more authentic you are, more yourself, the less personal you are, the more you express a universal experience or knowledge" (138). Being authentic for Eliade is to write in such a manner so as to provoke recognition with the present reality or to present another unknown reality which appears to be completely believable and where the readers stay focused on the events and actions which have a universal appeal. That would mean hiding behind ideas and symbols where lived experience is used as raw material which is connected to universals and modified accordingly. Eliade also claims: "It is only through experience that I can think of freedom since I can only get rid of certain things by experiencing them, I can only elucidate certain obsessions by looking them in the face, and I can only know true love by putting it behind me" (56-7). Eliade believes that if the modern man wants to experience freedom which will unleash his or her creativity, that person should go through "heroically experiencing things, rather than contemplating them at a distance" (57). We are to understand that a writer should open himself or herself to experiences to be able to become more liberated and write more authentically – knowing very well what each of the things or types of characters described really meant. Writing about one's experiences was supposed to relate them to types or rather reduce one's personality and individuality to describing a character in an authentic environment. That character contained the basic characteristics of its author, but no information about the minutest peculiarities which would have made the author discoverable in the book for everyone.

There had not been many examples in American literature before the 1950s with the beats and the confessionalists, a very early notable

exception being Jack London's *Martin Eden* (1909) who rather stuck to principles identical with Eliade's and not the visionary writer singing about himself – Henry Miller with his seminal *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939). In Romanian literature there had been at least three major precedents – the first – Mircea Eliade's *Maitreyi* (1933) a.k.a. *Bengal Nights* followed by its adaptation to film with the title *The Bengali Night* (*La nuit Bengali*) (1988), starring a very young Hugh Grant, the second – Sebastian's *For Two Thousand Years* (1934) and the third – Blecher's *Scarred Hearts* (1937). Eliade's novel, it must be admitted, is autofiction where the author is completely hidden behind his more universal character, or so its author thought. Initially hailed as a marvelously fresh take on the novel, it was later criticized once it became known that it was heavily autobiographical, before eventually being established as a major Romanian classic. The ethics of the matter became painfully felt when Maitreyi Devi, the female protagonist, heard about it by accident – 40 years after its publication in Romanian, and reacted by writing a refutation of the claims to sexual intimacy (night visitations) that Alain (Eliade) makes in the text through her *It Does not Die* (*Na Nanyate*) (1974)[74].

It was one thing for a woman to write about her own experiences, as was Serghi's case, or as was Duras's with her remarkable *L'Amant* (1984), and quite another to have a man write about them with a woman involved, especially when the woman (Devi) was in her maiden years, was from a different race, like Duras, and it happened during the colonial times, with Devi and Duras being on the opposite sides of the binary colonizer/ colonized. It was, as Eliade's case shows, very easy to slip and create a monstrous controversy. In Eliade's defense for the misstep, one could say that he was very young when he had the experience – only twenty-three and twenty-five when he published his novel in Romanian (he had promised Devi to never write about it in English), but Indian women were not so forgiving and the major researcher and scholar of religions is considered by at least one of them, Ginu Kamani, to have performed an act of "colonial-era

[74] For more information on the ethical part of the publication, see Ginu Kamani's "A Terrible Hurt: The Untold Story behind the Publishing of Maitreyi Devi", https://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/143651.html. – a. n.

arrogance"(Kamani). The Romanian reception, by contrast, was and has largely remained (after the translation of Devi's response – *Dragostea nu moare*) quite different – both male and female readers felt that Eliade had immortalized Devi through his *Maitreyi* (the only preserved name and that of her little sister) and that she had misunderstood him and overreacted. Eliade's novel was not translated into English until 1994, from French, in compliance with Devi's express desire not to have it published in English while she lived (She died in 1989).

A big step towards individuality in what I would call true (undisguised) autofiction is Serghi's novel. Describing her honeymoon, the Romanian writer again stayed true to the information also present in her *Memories.* Unlike Plath's Spanish summer, Serghi did not have more than a couple of days and she and her husband went to Timiș, not far from Brașov. She writes with such candor about the experience that the very intimation is striking for a novel published in 1938 in Romania:

> At Timiș, where we had gone for a couple of days for our honeymoon, Michi proved hasty, clumsy, as he was in all other matters and under all other circumstances, and I, sorely lacking in indulgence, bristling up like a hedgehog on the defensive. […] I was perhaps hoping for this euphoria which, after a glass of wine too many, clouds your judgement, makes it opaque. And here I was, on the contrary, lucid, with the claws out, bad as a cat about to attack, and Michi, intimidated, and so much more incapable. I hadn't imagined that he would also be intimidated or, for lack of experience, would behave brutally, or be too clumsy (192-3).

Constantly bumping into her husband's complacence about the marriage as a given (Edna Pontellier's husband's complex), receiving all the security, but also tedium, and nothing of the thrill and excitement that Plath undoubtedly got out of her marriage to Ted Hughes, with the occasional moments of conjugal dead air, as shown in the second "Spanish summer" *Journal* entry, Serghi creates an *alternative* honeymoon in her novel set in Balchik. Once in Balchik and with Michi gone back to Bucharest, Diana is completely enchanted by the place and so her burgeoning feelings for Alex (Serghi's love for Camil Petrescu projected on to the text), combined with the natural beauty of the place, as already mentioned, have created some of the best modernist depictions and certainly the most poetic ones Balchik has had to date.

This "honeymoon" with Alex is the only time that matters for Diana and has a bigger significance for her emotional life than the real one she has already had. And even though he is not entirely hers, always surrounded by other girls, oftentimes after other women, Diana is able to appreciate every moment of togetherness. Thus, Serghi creates passages of palpable chemistry between them and although they never consummate their love in Balchik, the very dreaming about these moments and imagining them is so intense that the reader is truly being transported to the place and the moment, completely immersed in the magical event. The Balchik passages contain numerous window scenes symbolically presenting Diana and Alex as belonging to two different worlds, so close and yet so far apart. Here is a representative scene with Diana daydreaming about Alex and Balchik at its most magical, which is reminiscent of Plath's youthful "Sunday at the Mintons" – with its languid sea imagery, mythological dancing, and impossibility of the two to really be together:

> The moon was big as always, perfectly round, as if perched deliberately right before my window. I was lying in bed naked. I had the sudden sensation he was watching me, and I felt frightened. I got up, I slipped into my nightgown and thought I might as well pull the curtains across at least half the window so I could cover the moon. There was somebody there, in the shade cast on the ground by a tree. I could only see the cigarette smoke. I asked myself if that was not Alex and if he somehow had seen me naked. I would have liked him to see me, but without me knowing it. I looked at myself in the mirror, I contemplated my bare shoulders and then combed my hair. The nightgown in pale blue suited me, the way it was, reaching the floor. I tried to imagine that I was in a ball dress, that the ball was taking place at the bottom of the sea, and I had gone up to the surface, with other sirens. Alex will come towards us and, out of all of them, he will choose me so we can dance on the beach under the moonlight. […] I climbed into bed without much desire. The moon was so close, big, and round, there, before me, that, without realizing, I found myself at the window again. The sea seemed to be coming closer, too, to my house. The moon path was like a road of molten silver. To the hills, towards the Tatar cartier, there were dogs barking. I asked myself if they somehow did not have their own pain, too. I pulled the shutter so that I could no longer see the moon, and climbed back into bed, grateful for being alone, for Michi not taking me into his arms, for not touching me. I fell asleep unaware of the sleep

> plunging me into a dreamless night, not understanding why I was grateful… so grateful that I lived, that I existed (212).

This remarkable passage from Serghi's novel explores the power of daydreaming generated, fed, and sustained by the place since the things that happen to Diana there are all magical. Despite the mythological recreation of herself and Petrescu in Balchik, Serghi always makes it clear that daydreams are indeed beautiful, but they are an alternate reality connected to the specific place, in this case, Balchik. For Plath, in her "Sunday at the Mintons", it is the Boston seaside with an almost identical reproduction of Henry and Diana being at the bottom of the sea. In both, this is undoubtedly symbolic, signifying a sense of irrevocably getting lost. The difference is that Diana manages to reach the surface while Henry cannot. In Plath this can be read as a dark premonition of her losing her future husband, being written prior to her marriage whereas with Serghi the novel is a post-factum account of her breaking up with Alex and divorcing her husband and demonstrates her ability to deal with the unpleasant outcome.

The sensation of belonging and togetherness is rendered also through a visit to the famous Tatar cartier mentioned as an attraction by numerous Romanian sources both in fiction and nonfiction and painted hundreds of times by the painters who, like the writers, flocked to what was perceived to be an exceptional place in Southern Dobruja:

> It seemed to me it was now that I was truly discovering Balchik. I felt like I was in another world, somewhere in Morocco, the way I knew it from the paintings of Ștefan Popescu reproduced in an album and from the movies. The houses were some shanty constructions glued together, lower than a medium man's height and so rudimentary that they looked like the awkward sketches of some kids, that is some sort of slanting cubes with two narrow window strips where the glass was divided in four parts, a door, and a basket. Some of them were from reed and rush, unpainted, others painted in garish yellow, still others in screaming pink, but most of them were so white that your eyes hurt. You felt like crying out loud: "Enough, too much white!" The small windows – as big as a geranium pot – a flower which was almost never absent in the patched up, cracked, or broken window glass. Every cabin had a stove askew and a bunch of kids around almost naked with spindlelegs and bloated tummies… "So many beautiful black eyes and white teeth, have

you ever seen before?" Alex asked. "No, neither have I seen so much misery" (218)

Unlike Plath's presentation of herself and her husband united under the familial 'we', Diana is the avid seeker of exciting new experiences which are kindly offered to her by her tour guide Alex who knows much more about the place than her, so the reader is discovering it through Diana's vividly reproduced impressions with Alex's interpretative assistance. The local details are given with much more warmth by Serghi (Diana) than by Plath (Sally). There is a palpable distance between the Englishmen (Americans) and the locals from Benidorm, Spain. Plath is looking at the Mediterranean magnificence of colors, fruit, and local life from the point of view of the precise observer who wants to capture every detail and who rarely enters into a contact with the people from the village. When referring to them, they discuss everyday matters related to consuming food and drinks, which signals an exclusion. By contrast, Serghi presents a closer contact of inclusion with the locals and though there is so much that separates Diana and Alex from the Tatars, both are fascinated and attracted by the sights, the people, their ineffable sadness, and quiet unconventional beauty. Although a novel, *The Spider's Web* is interspersed with numerous topo- and ethnographic references to Balchik and the vicinity where one feels almost every single tree and local Tatar is put into place and role and yet the novel does not give us a complete ethnic picture or exact location of all depicted sights like the proverbial villa "Dinu"[75] attesting to the narrator's constant sense of enchantment and disorientation. Another major difference between the represented Silvia and Ted and the fictional projection of Serghi and Petrescu is the smugness of the English/ American attitude, the fascination with the exoteric world but not the participation in it. Unlike them, here Diana and Alex penetrate the cartier which comes not without danger, something that even the locals refrain from doing. Still by way of explanation, if not excuse, the representation of otherness in travel writing generally tends to be "simplistic" as Kostova argues in her "Acts of Intercultural and Interlingual Mediation in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters*" (11). It stems from the perceived

[75] See Boev, Hristo. *The Different Dobruja between the Wars* (160 -1). – a. n.

false representation of a "*monolingual space*" (Kostova 11). And in that space foreignness expressed and rendered or reproduced through the language of the travel narrative (in this case English and Romanian) could produce nothing but summaries of what was communicated.

One of the most intimate moments between Diana and Alex is when they take a boat and make a tour of the Balchik coastline with it in the company of a Turk which is one of the crowning experiences for Serghi's daydreamed honeymoon:

> That night Alex and I took a boat and went out with it. In the beginning, I was the one that paddled, then I left my place to the boatsman and moved next to Alex. He asked me if I wanted to go to bed, folded my garment and put it under my head like a pillow, and he sat down next to me. I felt amazing by his side. Between us there was an understanding, of peace and calm, like the sea on which we were gliding. I did not feel the need to talk. Alex was also silent. I did not want anything to happen, and nothing happened. I was looking at the sky, as for Alex, his thoughts were impervious to me. I could feel his breath on my arm, hanging down, as if inviting the touch of his lips and yet I thought: 'If he kissed my arm, something would break the spell of the moment and would be a pity.' He did not kiss it. We were gliding ahead along the moonlight path when the boatsman started humming slowly his *Cara-câz.* Balchik was indistinguishable from the rest of the coast leading to Cape Caliacra except by its lanterns which in the distance looked like some sparks dispersed by the locomotive of a train (221)[76].

Again, it is enough to compare the passage to the uneasy sense of "wrongness" from Plath's *Journals* to see that between Diana and Alex there is a harmony, and it is there every time when they are not discussing their possible future together. Serghi presents us these moments, too, so we can sense ourselves that awkward as Diana's marriage to Michi is, just about as awkward would be a marriage to Petrescu (Alex), naturally in other aspects, but very likely equally unbearable.

When Petrescu read the manuscript with a huge delay, blaming his preparation for defending his doctoral thesis which he had been

[76] The significance of the ethnic silence is analyzed in *The Different Dobruja* (107). – a. n.

working on for 7 years, Serghi reports his being furious by discovering himself in Alex, that is, in what he saw as a caricature of himself. Although Serghi's mythologizing the man rendered an aggrandized version of Petrescu in which he was hardly recognizable, he cowardly asks: "What will the people say?" (Serghi 260). Obviously, he was afraid people would think he had had an affair with Serghi, which did not happen in life, but most of all he seems to have been concerned not to appear ridiculous. To which Serghi replies in a *The End of the Affair* kind of irony: "Since you aren't my husband, you can't be ridiculous" (260). The following exchange between them is also indicative of the effect of the novel on one of its major prototypes and what it holds for autofiction in general: "'What is the novel's idea?' he asks to get me [her] into a predicament. 'There will be specialists who will find the idea, I have offered them [the characters] life.' 'You've offered yourself with too much sincerity.' 'Sincerity is a gift like any other,' says Julien Green[77], not everyone who wants it can have it'" (267). And it seems both have a different perception of *sincerity* because the fascinating altercations continue with Petrescu asking Serghi to rework the novel into a collection of novellas, understandably, with Alex gone from the text: "'I want you to make it understood that nothing else happened there in the courtyard [reference to Alex and Diana's first kiss].' 'Nothing else?! Nothing ever happened.' 'That erotic scene can go missing as well.' 'I will not renounce on it.'" (273).

2. Conjugal frictions – the *Poems, Journals* and *Letters* vs *The Spider's Web*

As Butscher claims, Plath's poetry alone cannot provide enough of the so badly needed answers (20). However, the aim of this part of the study is not to search for every single one of them in the poetry collection, but to point out the presence of the conflict in some of the poems, compare this representation to the *Journals* and *Letters*, and outline the points of contention that may have led to the ultimate dissolution of the marriage. Three key poems to that effect will be examined – from 1959 and her most productive October 1962, which

[77] A bilingual writer living and writing in France, in English and French, most of his writings in English being his own translations, mainly famous for his *Léviathan* (1929). – a. n.

constitutes the bulk of the *Ariel* poems published in 1965 and not until 2004 in their restored original edition. Although written at about the same time *The Bell Jar* reviews the summer of 1953 while the *Ariel* poems reflect the latest developments in Plath's marriage and everyday life from the 1962 fall. In both major works, naturally, Plath uses her accumulated impressions and experiences to create the texts. The major differences between the *Ariel* collection and the poems written prior to it are in the approach to both the form and the content. Influenced by the liberated idiom of Lowell's ground-breaking *Life Studies* and Sexton's thematically bold poetry, Plath threw her knowledge and skills in classical rhymes and meter to the winds and wrote with the fervor of capturing every important moment which she turned into a challenging confessional experience. Another change was Plath's realization that poetry should be recited rather than read silently. A third important transformation was stripping poetry of its traditional symbolism in order to open the doors to novel interpretations of poems written under great stress which, I shall argue, aspire to deliverance.

2.1. "The Beekeeper's Daughter" – the life summary of a humble bee

As with Diana's final identification with the dad's girl, once both Michi and Alex have proved disappointing (392), a poem that shows Plath's return to the figure of her father is "The Beekeeper's Daughter" from 1959. Part of a five-poem sequence, deeply symbolic, together with poems revelatory of certain disagreements with Hughes, Plath creates a soil of patriarchal acceptance coming from the ever-absent real father figure in Plath's life.

Plath time and time again reimagines her father as God, this time around he is the "maestro of the bees" (*CP* 118). Not only the bees, but everything related to them is replete with imagery of fertility and female sexuality: "You move among the many-breasted hives/ My heart under your foot, sister of a stone" (*CP* 118). If we compare this line to the Lion King-like representation of Ted wading through the thick forest with all animals bowing before him and the observer (Plath) at a safe distance admiring the jovial stride of a giant and a ruler of a world whom she lovingly calls "my man", here we have a clear departure from this portrayal of Ted's, but we have instead her father projected on to a

treacherous Ted incorporating the reproduction of her father's enigmatic obsession with bees. Indeed, his majestic stride and the already defenseless lyrical speaker who is trampled upon and whose presence remains unobserved by God, being likened to a stone, *does* connect the poem to Hughes and his perceived neglect of herself – she becomes even lesser than a bee – a stone, a possible reflection of Hughes's attention to other women at Plath's expense, resulting in her loss of sexuality and fertility for the giant, without her completely losing these qualities. The birds will still discern her among the stones, and she will remain alive, but only good enough to be the food of their "beaks" (*CP* 118). If the bees symbolize docile submissive women, the birds are the aggressive women who will be eager to wipe off her existence before she could be noticed by another man. While the grandeur of the man-God is unquestioned, and here undoubtedly that man is Ted Hughes blending with her father, her own projection as a goddess is in a relationship to the *man-father* who barely notices her – not the *ikran* that can be mastered from the related short story "Among the Bumblebees", but God that only may deign to consider her as a veritable *bee*.

Relating even more to her long deceased father, like Serghi's Diana, Plath goes on to compare the fiercely competitive human matriarchy to that of the plants which is more tolerant to each member and much less dependent on a singular masculine pollinator, using a scientific approach: "The Golden Rain Tree drips its powders down./ In these little boudoirs streaked with orange and red/ The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings/ To father dynasties" (*CP* 118). Moreover, *the anthers* are viewed as undergoing a trans-androgynous transformation in which they are the true "fathers" of the ensuing dynasty – "a queenship no mother can contest" (*CP* 118). One can feel Plath's admiration for the father figure, but also her regret that there cannot be an eternally indisputable alfa female in human society and the father figure strongly reduced, with the woman's position remaining fiercely contested.

Found herself among the stones, the lyrical 'I' likens herself to a "solitary bee" that finds another smaller father figure on the ground under the splendor of the flowers enjoying the pollen of the father-God. The queen bee – not herself, but another woman will also be the one

that will see and experience the waning of the King in a Shakespearean tinge – "[she] marries the winter of your year" (*CP* 118). This poem, like so many more poems and short stories by Plath, is eerily prophetic, envisaging her eternal separation from Hughes. She will be gone for him while he is still in the prime of his life. It will be another woman that will share his last moments – the third wife, although second as official marriage goes, Ted Hughes was to have – Carol Orchard, a nurse, whom he married in 1970. Here Plath's projection of herself as the dethroned queen, losing the alfa position for the God she imagined Ted Hughes to be was to be refuted with Ted demythologized by Hughes himself – he was not always after glamorous women and at the time of his second marriage, already forty years old, he must have sought peace and quiet in a woman who did not shine except in the eye of the beholder.

2.2. "The Rabbit Catcher" – the White Goddess transformed

A poem from the *Restored Ariel* that is uniformly considered to reflect deeper differences in Plath and Hughes, already well into marriage turmoil, is "The Rabbit Catcher" dated *21 May 1962*. Unlike the only poem collection published while Plath lived, *The Colossus*, *Ariel* was striking with its bold confessionalism and psychic landscapes. The *Restored Ariel*, even more so, with poems that rivaled Sexton in mere audacity, simplicity, and unacceptability of the related lived experience. And under this term, we must also include everything relived by the poet not only physically, but also mentally. In this poem, Plath, undoubtedly under the influence of Hughes's animalistic poetry, where he writes from the point of view of different animals endowed with the human capacity of describing how they feel but deprived of the ability to change any of it, sees herself as a rabbit. Doing so, through the poem, she manages both to present the sensations of the animal, but also to stand back from it and have a final look at her breaking marriage. The image of the *rabbit*/ *hare* was well known and accepted to represent Plath, hence the interpretation of "the sacrificial hare" from Hughes's play *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* discussed in Chapter 1. Unlike Hughes's insistence on presenting mostly predatory animals – falcons, eagles, wolves and foxes, Plath reveals the power of describing the sensations of a cute captive herbivore.

The first stanza thus portrays the gagging sensation of the ensnared animal with the fur coming into its mouth against a blinding sea symbolizing an environment of everything dead in an unnerving oil spill quickly spreading further out: "the wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,/ […] the sea/ Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead/ Unreeling in it, spreading like oil" (*CP* 193). In the snare, the rabbit thrashes, desperately trying to break free, but unable to do so, loses mobility, forced to taste "the malignity of the gorse" (*CP* 193), yet another striking occurrence of the word, like the "malignant hills" in "That Widow Mangada" (*JP* 249), but here the sensation is that the gorse is strangely sweet and deadly with its "black spikes" and "extreme unction" (*CP* 193), suggesting violence in domesticity (Rose 155). From the "White Goddess" that Plath had proposed herself to be ("the girl to be God") who "is anti-domestic" (Rose 154) and who is supposed to be "enigmatic", following the advice of Virginia Woolf (*J* 289) and the muse Hughes had supposedly taken her to be, she appears completely exposed, cornered, and demythologized. But Plath finds a way to weave her lived experience yet again into mythology – that of the trapped animal.

The trapped rabbit becomes a white canvas which Plath paints with reflections of past experiences involving the difficulties of womanhood. So once again she evokes the hospital where she was giving birth: "Set close, the birth pangs./ The absence of shrieks/ Made a hole in the hot day, a vacancy./ The glassy light was a clear wall,/ The thickets quiet" (*CP* 194). The rabbit is not just a projection of her trapped self but remains the ensnared animal among the aromatic *malignant gorse* and which is still in the *thickets*. The relationship between the rabbit and its catcher has evolved – that is the animal was willing to enter the enclosed environment (marriage), but this has changed: "And we, too, had a relationship –/ Tight wires between us,/ Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring/ Sliding shut on some quick thing,/ The constriction killing me also" (*CP* 194). The last stanza in this exceptional poem reads as a sad commentary on the impossibility for one to excel in marriage, to tear down the walls one oneself has built separating them from the other one, thus the rabbit catcher is himself caught in his own trap. This, however, though true in principle, does not seem to have been true for Hughes who found his own way out of his

marriage-trap – by having relationships with other women, leaving Plath *tied* and *constricted*. In "The Owl" from *The Birthday Letters* he claims to be aware of the *foreignness* of the experience (33) for Plath to live in England and adapt to the English customs and mores. He gives examples to explain Plath's imagination: "I saw my world through your eyes/ […] Plein hedge hawthorns were peculiar aliens,/ A mystery of peculiar lore and doings. Anything wild, on legs, in your eyes/ Emerged at a point of exclamation" (33). The wide open "eyes of the owl" in Hughes's poem, among others, present the foreign American outlook on a familiar world. Despite a claim that Plath's "affinities and interests were of a hyphenated Anglo-American nature" (Ellis 14) and her often mixing vocabularies and using a different spelling, *hovering* over the Atlantic (Brain 47), their manifestations were clearly non-English to Hughes. Indeed, Plath's writing when animalistic is only perfunctory by comparison to Hughes's poetic world steeped in old English lore. Hughes also felt he had to do a take on "The Rabbit Catcher", possibly to exonerate himself as much as he could, and so provides a plethora of circumstantial details leading to the writing of the poem, throwing Plath's idea into a different light. In his response it starts with Plath's contempt for what Hughes jocularly calls "private kingdoms" (144) referring to private estates in the countryside off limits for tourists. When he finds a snare, Plath tears it up and throws it into the trees (Hughes 145) as evidence of barbarity rather than observance of an old tradition. Hughes's conclusion is that, referring to Plath: "you were weeping with a rage/ That cared nothing for rabbits. You were locked/ Into some chamber gasping for oxygen/ Where I could not find you, or really hear you,/ Let alone understand you" (145-6). Still, he wonders if she had indeed caught something in him "nocturnal and unknown" to himself. Or, it has been her "doomed self" (146).

To her credit, in this poem Plath does not try to be profound in a game/ hunter mythology but uses the animal imagery and imagined animalistic mindset to render sensations that identify the woman with the victim in this opposition and the animal sensations only serve to heighten even more the uttered shrill cry to the universe, but, as Stephen Crane assures us, "the fact has not created in me [Him] a sense of obligation" (1335). Amazingly, Plath's poem could be read and interpreted completely without making associations with the unhappy

state of her own or other women's marriages. If Hughes had not been accused of cruelty to Plath through this poem by critics such as Rose, he might have abstained from this convoluted explanation.

2.3. "The Jailer" – a nightmare come true

At about the same time when *The Bell Jar* was being written, Plath also wrote "The Jailer" (*The Restored Ariel*). In the poem the female lyrical 'I' is imprisoned in a cell somewhere in her penal colony of a marriage perceived in her novel as "a totalitarian state" (*BJ* 89). The poem is foreboding of Margaret Atwood's celebrated feminist take on forced sex for procreation, *The Handmaid's Tale*, only here standardly the female prisoner has "been drugged and raped" (*CP* 226), but projected against Plath's marriage, the conventional abuse of female captivity during times of war is a strong accusation and a metaphor of what a marriage may turn into for a woman. In the text dreams of freedom are mixed with prison cell reality and again, with a borrowed line from "The Beekeeper's Daughter": "I spread to the beaks of birds" (*CP* 226) once in her dream she is dropped from high up and her "capsule is broken" (*CP* 227). The jailer hurts his prisoner time and again with "his armor of fakery" and his "high cold masks of amnesia" (*CP* 227). So, the lyrical 'I' declares: "I die with variety –/ Hung, starved, burned, hooked" (*CP* 227). Unable to leave and traveling in her dreams to yet other nightmares unlike Jack London's *The Star Rover*, where the prisoner receives an alleviation of the mind at night for the torture during the day by traveling to infinitely more pleasant environments and topoi, the lyrical 'I' is completely trapped.

In this poem, it has been accepted that Plath is again referring to Hughes's lies about his whereabouts when he was already having an affair with Assia Wevill so the lyrical 'I' for the first time expresses her hatred of him: "I wish him dead or away" (*CP* 227), but then she realizes that she needs him as much as he must need her since the lyrical 'I' hopes that he would not have anyone else to torture if it were not for her and so she asks: "what would he/ Do, do, do without me?" (*CP* 227). The *Journals* do not offer any controversial information since, Hughes saw to it that the last three years were removed. The letters offer little to that effect before the end of September 1962.

2.4. The *Letters* – the cry for help that did not alert anyone

Although not so much part of the triumphant 'we' in her honeymoon, Plath still regularly refers to herself and Ted in the second personal plural, but also lovingly speaks of him, for example in a letter to his parents dated 10 June 1962 where she calls him "a marvellous planter" (2: 781). In this period, she keeps a massive business correspondence where Ted resurfaces occasionally as the person whose reassuring presence she values. Still, there is an important letter dated 11 July 1962 from Devon addressed to Dr Beuscher (Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse, Dr. Nolan in *The Bell Jar*) with whom Plath shares information concerning their marital life that she has not shared with anyone yet. The letter is alarming and signals dangerous developments:

> Dear Dr. Beuscher,
>
> I honestly hope you feel you can answer this letter by return, as I am suddenly, after all that happy stuff I wrote you some while ago, at sea, and a word from you I could carry around with me would sustain me like the Bible sustains others. […] What I need some good wise word on is the situation between Ted & me. As you can tell from my last letter, I thought I had at least stepped into the life that would be the growing-pot for us both---the alternation of outdoor work in the garden & fishing for Ted, with each of us writing more and better than ever in our separate studies, and the two beautiful babies and nothing to worry about but fallout, I felt Life begins at 30. Then everything went queer. Ted began to leap up in the morning & intercept the mail. He began to talk, utterly unlike him, of how he could write & direct film scripts, how he was going to win the Nobel Prize, how he had been asleep all the time we were married, recoiling, as the French say, so he could jump the better. How he wanted to experience everybody & everything, there was a monster in him, a dictator. […] He would come out with these things after spurts of lovemaking as in our honeymoon days, asking me like a technician, did I like this, did I like that. […] I just felt sick, as if I were the practise [sic] board for somebody else. I get these semi-clairvoyant states, which I suppose are just diabolic intuition (2: 790).

Plath saw clearly that their marriage was crumbling down although, as the letter testifies, she was harboring hopes that working separately they could go on, that their marriage had entered another stage or phase and things could possibly go back to the previous normal. The behavior Plath describes in Ted certainly reveals him as a deviant

and shows disrespect for her as his wife. Plath goes on to cite intercepted phone calls when she spoke to Assia Wevill and her strong conviction that Ted was having an affair with her. Not having hard evidence, she says it in the letter, that she can see in the future and has seen it all there. In her poems and even early short stories, as already demonstrated, Plath offers solid proof of her clairvoyant abilities being prophetic across the board. In the same letter Plath accepts that Hughes could be unfaithful since she feels she has married him for life: "What could I do? I would never in my life think of divorce, because I married till death and am his wife till death. He can have tarty women & bastards, but only one wife and her children" (2: 793). She also says: "I am simply not cool & sophisticated. My marriage is the center of my being, I have given everything to it without reserve. Worst, my writing is killed by this mess. I write, not in compensation, out of sorrow, but from an overflow, a surplus, of joy, & my ability to criticize my work & do it well is my objectivity, which stems from happiness, not sorrow" (2: 793). And the *Ariel* poems, it seems, were created out of joy – the ability to lay everything out, pinpoint all the key issues of her marriage, the joyful sensation of doing something great, a certain sense of deliverance. A letter to the same doctor from 20 July 1962 gives another clue to Plath's suicide: "I have no desire for other men. Ted is one in a million. Sex is so involved with me in my admiration for male intelligence, power and beauty that he is simply the only man I lust for. […] It is not very much consolation to me that Ted really deeply & faithfully loves me, while he follows any woman with bright hair, or an essay on Shakespeare in her pocket, or an ability for flamenco dancing" (2: 799).

The most interesting letters remain to her doctor psychiatrist. With Ted Hughes no longer a constant presence, because of his sudden change of heart concerning her, Plath keeps making important comments on her life, failing marriage and Ted himself following his media appearances. Here is one of them: "Anyhow, Ted is on the rampage---writing letters and even radio broadcasts about the advantages of destruction, breaking one's life into bits every ten years, and damn the pieces" (2: 803). Plath also accuses him of being a fascist: "His favorite poem of his own is pure ego-Fascist, about a hawk 'I kill

where I please because it is all mine.' I realise[78] how he considered I might kill myself over this (as did the wife of someone we know well), and what he did was worth it to him" (2: 803). While deploring Ted's change, she hates the position she has found herself in: "But I would like to break my life, & go ahead with him, not be relegated to the homefront: the suffering & pitied but very repugnant mother-wife" (2: 803). Still, the doctor does not seem to respond to Plath despite her intense letters and her offering to pay her in various ways for "the letter sessions" (2: 816). In a letter dated September 4, 1962, she supplicates her to respond: "I'd be awfully grateful just to have a postcard from you saying you think any paid letter sessions between us are impractical or unhelpful or whatever, but something final. Believe me, that would be a relief. It is the feeling of writing into a void that never answers, or may at any moment answer, that is difficult" (2: 816).

The letters become more intense and desperate. A couple of days before her frantic burst of artistic energy leading to the October 1962 poems, on September 29 she wrote Dr. Beuscher again:

> I am sorry to write so much, but it is my one hope, I think I am dying. I am just desperate. Ted has deserted me, I have not seen him for 2 weeks, he is living in London without address. Tonight, utterly mad with this solitude, rain and wind hammering my hundred windows, I climbed to his study out of sheer homesickness to read his writing, lacking letters, and found them --- sheafs of passionate love poems to this woman, this one woman to whom he has been growing more & more faithful, describing their orgasms, her ivory body, her smell, her beauty, saying in a world of beauties he married a hag […] --- and I am just dying. […] She is so beautiful, and I feel so haggish & my hair a mess & my nose huge & my brain brainwashed & God knows how I shall keep together. He has spent all the money, left me with nothing. I have almost the equal of my novel grant in our small savings [*The Bell Jar*]) (2: 843).

The letter is eloquent enough of the utter desperation that Plath felt both physically and mentally. The rather long letter insists that she has no friends or relatives in England, so she is completely at a loss of what to do (2: 843). The letter is suggestive of the poems that were to be written days later, and their dark tones reflected a hopeless situation.

[78] Plath uses British and American spelling alternatively. During her time in England, she sticks to British spelling – that is the spelling used in *The Bell Jar* as well. – a. n.

As we can also see in "The Jailer", Plath loved Ted and would have forgiven him if he had come back: "The shock of this has almost killed my heart. I still love Ted, the old Ted, with everything in me & the knowledge that I am ugly and hateful to him now kills me. He has kept this affair a rabid secret, although seeing my intuitions" (2: 843). Plath's situation was dire indeed as revealed in these lines: "What kills me is that I would like so much to be friends with him, now I see all else is impossible. I mean my God my life with him has been a daily creation, new ideas, new thoughts, our mutual stimulation. Now he is active & passionately in love out in the world & I am stuck with two infants & not a soul, mother has lost her job, I have no-one" (2: 843). It would be an understatement to say that Plath was madly in love with Hughes. His affair with Wevill must have sounded like the end of the world for the sensitive Plath who in 1956 wrote her "Ode for Ted". From an all-American girl she had become the all-American wife of the 1950s: "I had my life set as I wished --- beautifully and happily domestic, with lots of intellectual stimulus & my part-time writing" (2: 844) only to see that she had built a castle in the sand. Plath had no hope of receiving assistance from the state, either: "I feel Ted hates us. Wants to kill us to be free to spend all his money on her, and English laws are so mean, I have no hope of even subsistence if I go to court" (2: 844). With all their common friends siding with the new couple (Ted and Assia), Plath felt an alien in England.

On October 9, 1962, she wrote her mother the following lines: "I am getting a divorce. It is the only thing. He wants absolute freedom, and I could not live out a life legally married to someone I now hate and despise" (2: 845). And then continues: "The foulness I have lived, his wanting to kill all I have lived for six years by saying he was just waiting for a chance to get out, that he was bored & stifled by me, a hag in a world of beautiful women just waiting for him, is only part of it" (2: 845). Among the few people Plath could have counted on there were Catholics who, she felt, would turn her out after the divorce so her sense of despair only grew. In a burst of self-instilled enthusiasm, she also writes: "I should say right away America is out for me. I want to make my life in England. If I start running now I will never stop. I shall hear of Ted all my life, of his success, his genius, his woman, his women. I must make a life as fast as I can, all my own" (2: 847). The letter then

continues with the account of several house issues which forebode the demolishing of the house (2: 847).

In a letter to her mother dated 12 October 1962, there seems to be a period of recovery in which Plath is her usual joyous self, professing her love for the culture life of London: "I am dying for London --- the plays, art shows, people with brains & free lance jobs. Frieda & Nich can go to good London schools" (2: 854). Her daily routine for creating *Ariel* is well documented here:

> Every morning, when my sleeping pill wears off I am up about 5, in my study with coffee, writing like mad---have managed a poem a day before breakfast! All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me. As soon as the nanny comes & I know I've got a stretch of guaranteed time, I'll finish the novel. I have 40 children's picture books at my side to review, for the leftish weekly I've done them for before (2: 855).

With the initial impossibility to be friends with Ted and his aliasing with his possessive sister Olwyn, with Catholic England against her and most of their family friends deserted, Plath was showing enviable resilience and morale. In between the lines, as Alvarez shares later, he should have seen the desperate cry for help and the need of immediate action. As in Sexton's case, after Linda Sexton's intimations, when she wrote, the daughter was sure that her mother was all right. With *The Bell Jar* submitted for publishing and *Ariel* completely ready, Plath had already sealed her legacy to the world of letters. Finally, England offered an anonymity far from Aurelia's vigilant eye.

The way Plath's marriage came undone based on the *Letters* was certainly the biggest blow Plath could have borne. It had to do with more than destroying an entire life and a woman's world. Plath's works related to her marriage remain among her best and are considered by many to be great. Even though prophetic of the end of their relationship, they were based on a false idea, hoping against hope that the marriage somehow could be saved. Still, could we pinpoint the reasons for its dissolution? Clearly, both Plath and Hughes had a narcissistic streak, and it was all the more painful for Plath to have to hear that Hughes did not consider her pretty and so have her pride wounded by his flagrant affair. Despite this, Plath manages to transcend this narcissism both in

life and writing, her works having a strong universal appeal, with humbleness showing through in most of her works, including *The Bell Jar* (her alter ego – Elly). It is also possible that the "dictator" in Hughes required another submissive victim – Assia Wevill, before eventually Hughes became a more emotionally settled middle-aged man. Whatever the reason(s), by writing about herself and her lived experience, after 1956, Plath managed to create excellent works of autofiction with marriage at their center and interesting ideas which remain an object of scholarly interest to this day.

2.5. Overcoming conjugal adversity but not unscathed – *The Spider's Web* and *Memories*

As already said, the marriage between Cella Serghi and the engineer Alfino Seni was not the love at first sight which brought together Silvia and Ted. Despite the demands that society imposed on both men and women, Serghi's account of the epoch in *Memories* tells us that: "young women fell in love and wanted to be loved with heart and imagination" (49). In her *The Spider's Web* Serghi, being true to her own life, makes it clear that Michi (Seni) was the only presentable serious choice she could make and who did not require a dowry from her. The many other gentlemen who profess to be in love with Diana, the narrator dismisses easily as most of them appear to have done it for the sport of courting a girl and asking her hand in marriage. She loves only one – Petre Barbu/ Alex Dobrescu (Camil Petrescu) but he seems to be as elusive as the sea – always somewhere there, yet out of Serghi's reach. As the Mangalia and Balchik scenes from the novel prove again and again, Serghi, born in Constanța pe *strada Mării* (Sea Street), identified with the sea in the same way as Dubarova and Plath felt a connection to it that could never be taken away from them. In fact, one can argue that the recession of the sea from their works was detrimental to their lives (both committed suicide with the sea gone from their last texts) since an organic connection to a mighty element of identification was cut off.

In her *Memories* Serghi evokes her meeting her future husband and it is rendered in *The Spider's Web* almost verbatim. In her *Memories* Serghi feels that a potential marriage to him would be

constricting and compares it to constraining the sea in imagery reminiscent of Dubarova's "shackled sea":

> I let him speak. He spoke hurriedly, slurring over words. I listened to the sound of the sea. I knew I would always bump into life like the sea smashes into the rocks, that I would carry in me all its nostalgies and an eternal yearning for freedom. If the engineer asks me to be his wife, I will lose my freedom, but will get rid of many worries. Even the sea is not free, I was trying to console myself. It is confined by shores. Perhaps it rages so because it, too, has lost its freedom. It seems to hit its head against walls, bump into rocks and as a result, its mouth is all foam (16).

Marriage as "a totalitarian state" in Plath finds its sea equivalent in Serghi – a sea that has lost its liberty. It is quite remarkable that both writers make this comment about marriage from the prism of the memory and for both it has been a sort of prison. But Serghi's getting married to the engineer is not without a compromise not only on her part: "'I'm marrying you, but my family mustn't know about it, for the time being.' 'Why not?' 'Because I'm marrying a girl without a dowry. I'm a construction engineer and a construction engineer without capital cannot construct'" (16). The drama of this insulting situation is given considerable space in *The Spider's Web*. Numerous examples are supplied testifying to the impossibility to bend this unwritten marriage law (42, 125, 130, 147, 152, 156, 161, 164, 190). This moment is rendered in the novel in the following manner: "'Dear Diana, they are alarmed. I don't know who has told them that I come to see you daily. They're panicking that I'm going to marry you. They are frightened.' 'And why are they frightened?' 'How do I know? Perhaps, because you have no dowry'" (156). In retrospect, Diana summarizes: "I was a burden for my family. My sister had also grown up. She had yet to finish school, to marry, too, without a dowry… Marrying Michi I thought I was going to make things calm down, I was going to take a burden off my mum's shoulders. Michi signified a shelter, peace and quiet, a warm friendship, and for my family, a big relief" (190). Still, the problem with not being loved remains and as it simmers through Serghi's novel, at the end, it finally explodes.

Losing Petrescu at the *ștrand*, Serghi meets him a year later, already married to Seni, and provides the following remarkable portrait of the writer in which he is very different from the towering stature and

imposing personality of Ted Hughes: "He was not tall [1. 61 m.] and that seemed to annoy him as much as his deafness. He had a limping gait. The shoulders in a permanent shrug, the eyes close to each other, attentive, as if he wanted to hear with them, protesting all the time vehemently against everything that was happening around him, in the country, in the world" (22). Besides being a famous writer loved by a promising woman writer, Petrescu shares another characteristic with Hughes – his first wife committed suicide (Serghi 50). Serghi quotes Eugen Lovinescu almost completely agreeing with the description the literary critic provides: "an exuberant little man, irritable, always in a hurry. Peevish, full of talent, but also of fatuity" (23). Serghi argues that only the last of these qualifiers was not true of him but points out that Petrescu was extremely vain and painfully sensitive to criticism (27).

The physical peculiarities are smoothed out in *The Spider's Web* in the figure of Petre Barbu/ Alex Dobrescu, that is Serghi does not dwell on them, but describes the languid figure of a sea god who is too absentminded to always hear well and who is invariably surrounded by girls in beach attire. Petrescu's ability to swim, just like Plath's endowing Hughes with highly developed Spanish language skills, is transposed into an accomplishment of perfect swimming in both Petre and Alex. The literary side of Petrescu is transformed into literary interests in Alex while Petre is an excellent painter. This sense of incompletion in Alex who is also a person who has not finished his medical education but passes himself off as a doctor is highly suggestive of Petrescu's reputation as a writer – that is there is the close circle of the *Zburătorul* who know about him, but if Serghi goes to the library and asks about him, the librarian wonders if she does not mean Cezar Petrescu (13) since, his masterpiece *The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War* was not published yet in 1927. Just like Ted and Silvia who also had a literary collaboration of sharing precious literary advice, Serghi played a role in making Petrescu's female characters authentic and took in turn advice from him in her own writing.

In both her *Memories* and *The Spider's Web* Serghi provides the reasons for her marriage break-up and they could be summed up under an incompatibility of characters – the romantic side in Serghi (Diana) and the pragmatic down-to-earth Seni (Michi), but that is not all. Unlike Ted and Silvia's marriage based on love in the 1950s, Serghi's marriage

was an affair based on financial dependence which proved to be unsustainable. In the novel Diana asks herself time and again if she can settle for *security* without love in marriage, being fully aware of the harsh alternative of having love (Alex) without the possibility of marriage. In the intense psychological exploration of the reasons for the dissolution of her marriage Diana (Serghi) asks herself again and again if she can put up with the things that irritate her in Michi (Seni) and if she can continue having a double life. When she opts for leaving Michi, Diana has already been unfaithful to him (with Alex), but Michi has also had an affair to Diana's dismay (303). Even though she does not admit to her own infidelity, Diana's convictions that a marriage should continue at all cost, if for nothing else, for Michi's (Seni's) sacrifice, are shattered. Diana (Serghi), just like Plath or the lyrical 'I' in the "Beekeeper's Daughter" accepts infidelity on part of her husband, but unlike Plath, who in her 11-July-1962 letter to her psychiatrist hopelessly holds on to keeping an imaginary alfa female position, simply considers the marriage profoundly compromised by both parties and, with no real love to keep it together, untenable.

In explaining women's mystery, Serghi quotes Simone de Beauvoir, saying "all a man does not or will not understand becomes the woman's mystery" (52), but in *The Spider's Web*, just like Plath in her works containing the father figure, against the Romanian tradition of male writers of *la femme fatale*, creates *l'homme fatal*. Both Petrescu and Hughes become gods in Serghi's and Plath's autofictions while the writers' literary feminine selves juxtaposed to them are systematically demystified and demythologized, both occasionally trying to preserve something of the goddess aura of the woman which otherwise thrives. As Serghi demonstrates through her writing, it is all in men's imagination and it is within the powers of the woman to keep it aflame. Plath through her *The Bell Jar* and "Lady Lazarus" claims that it can triumph on its own, although her desperate post-Hughes letters to her psychiatrist disprove the fictional claims.

3. The marital dissolution and its aftermath – four poems and one letter vs *The Spider's Web*

In *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* Al Alvarez, apparently affected by Sylvia Plath's death and in the wake of his own failed

attempt on his life, writes about suicide as a human phenomenon and examines its social, ecclesiastic, and emotional evolution through history in a cool Foucauldian manner. In the prologue dedicated to Plath, he remembers receiving her at *The Observer*. It was at the end of September 1962, and she told him "she was apartment hunting" (15). Alvarez recalls her talking about "the new drive to write that was upon her" (15). Undoubtedly, Plath's *Ariel* cycle arisen from Plath's hectic early morning writing – 4 am before the children woke up and before the domestic chores that awaited her daily. While the new apartment – at 23 Fitzroy Road, London, where she moved alone with her two children, gave her an impetus to initially write and brave the extreme winter of 1963 – the worst in 150 years, the dire straits of the situation eventually took their toll. The exhilarating sensation of living where Yeats had lived before had gradually worn thin. With the pipes of the house frozen, a plumber hard to find and "as expensive as smoked salmon" weight for weight (Alvarez 33), the snow falling incessantly a bit after Christmas, Ted forever gone, and her new poems rejected, Plath's severe depression had returned with a vengeance. Her later "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" are still defiant, but in her last poems, days before her death, "Words" and "Edge", one can clearly sense Dickinson's palpable "letting go".

3.1. "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" – the angry goddess and the father figure enshrouded in controversy

It has been suggested that *The Restored Ariel*, through the original arrangement of the poems, clearly presupposes that it was designed to be a collection of "affirmation" (Kendall 147). Indeed, the collection begins with the word "love" from "Morning Song" and finishes with "spring" from "Wintering". The theme of rebirth is prevalent, and Plath seems to be geared to weather the storm, literally the seemingly endless blizzard, and make it to the spring of 1963, but that is not what happened. The poems written after *Ariel* and not included in the collection point in a very different direction, the ones immediately preceding her death are bleak and portentous of the forthcoming end. As Kendall points out, "the hope of rebirth has disappeared, to be replaced by resignation" (149). They were included in Plath's *Collected Poems* published in 1981 which won the Pulitzer Prize and Plath became the fourth recipient of the award to have

received it posthumously. In this scheme of things "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are two of the most emblematic poems Plath wrote, a mid- and a late *Ariel* poem dated *12 October 1962* and *23-29 October 1962*, respectively. These are also the two poems that have stirred an enormous controversy mainly based on the perception of the following literary crimes in Plath: extreme narcissism, an improper poetic identification, derangement on part of the lyrical 'I' (Plath) and lack of self-irony. I shall examine the main points of contention and will provide a response with an accent on Plath's crumbled marriage.

Although dismissing it as critically indescribable, Bloom acknowledges that "Lady Lazarus" has left its mark as something that everybody knows and connects at least to a fleeting idea or image, so he calls it "the 'Casabianca' of my generation" (2). Indeed, as already shown, Plath has many poems which would benefit from multiple readings and compared to some of them, it does appear a bit shallow. Bloom further insists that he feels "the reader is harangued, not persuaded" (4). But then a pertinent question would be – what is wrong with being *harangued*, if you are reading poetry? The insistent aggression of "Lady Lazarus" is part of what makes it so powerful. It is literally a text that builds up a goddess emerging from the ashes of its own self-destruction but reading the poem *does* describe practices and *does* raise questions. Barbara Hardy, for instance, sees the poem as a multifaceted, multivector attack on voyeurism, a historical excursion to the Nazis and their cruel experiments with humans, realized in the induced resurrection in which the goddess identifying with the lyrical 'I' is already deranged. So, she concludes: "The fusion and dispersal, once more rational and irrational, makes the pattern of controlled derangement, creating not one mirror but a hall of mirrors, all differently distorting, and revealing many horrors" (135). Bruce Bawer calls this poem and "Daddy" "perverse and passionate" (16), but the critic considers them "bluntly address[ing] her [Plath's] most fundamental psychological conflicts", therefore unsurprisingly ubiquitously quoted (16). Termed by Sexton "hate poems", Bawer calls them "the most arresting of Plath's verses" (17) which employ "natural language and rhythms, manically insistent repetitions and multiple rhymes, and sensational, often surrealistic images" (17). However, Bawer accuses Plath of equating "the poet's suffering with that of

prisoners in Nazi concentration camps" and qualifies it "inexcusable" (17). The critic's protest goes much further: "behind, that is, Plath's shrill, deranged voice – there is precious little human dimension" (17). So, Bawer concludes that "the self is so engrossed in itself that there appears to be little possibility of enlightenment, of discovery; to read them [the two poems] is to feel that their goal is not self-knowledge but self-display, a morbid absorption in and superficial celebration of the poet's own sensitivity and imagined victimhood" (17).

Bawer manages to synthesize the main points of the initial criticism against the poems, which needs to be discussed not only to see the critical evolution in comparison with more recent critiques, but to provide yet another response which is based on close reading within the framework of a larger culturological discussion. This kind of interpretation certainly raises the question – if "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" are above all prime examples of *self-display* and *imagined victimhood*, what do their many admirers find in these poems? Are they some morbid readers who love to be victimized and pitied? We should not forget that among their avid readers are also the detractors of the poems who reread them just about as many times as the admirers. Jacqueline Rose summarizes the issue in the used metaphor in both poems, finding fault with this criticism as making contradictory claims to Plath's texts (22).

Although seemingly shallow, "Lady Lazarus" yields multiple hidden ideas open to interpretation. Christina Britzolakis, for instance, sees "a revenge plot starring the figure of the fatal woman or vampire" (138) – the angry goddess reacting to her men-assisted resurrection and the venality of the doctors who charge the woman in her for every restored faculty of hers (*CP* 246). Susan Gubar defends Plath in her recurrent Jewish identification in the poems by the "deployment of the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia" (165-6), and namely the impersonation of an absent speaker, which allows her "to find a language for the staggering horror of what had happened to speak as, for, with, and about the casualties in verse" (166). Gubar also specifies that in "Daddy" Plath says: "I *may* well be a Jew" (180) (emphasis added), suggesting *Jewishness* is a probability, not a definitive identification. In fact, comparing these poems to Berryman's, Guber finds Plath's identification "more fictive" (180), therefore more

conscious of the issue, but Plath in *Ariel* is not a poet who makes compromises, and this probing identification is hardly a compromise, it is rather an aspiration which may have more basis than it seems at first glance. It stems from Plath's German-Austrian background, therefore a probability, while Plath's extended appropriation of the Jewish suffering from the Holocaust, I believe, should be read as the suffering of any woman with a despotic father/ husband. It is just that these sufferings are as unjustified as the terror exerted by that Nazi-like father/ husband. If we accepted that Plath speaks only through the *prosopopoeia* that Gubar proposes, having assumed the voice of the absent Jewish woman who bears all the brutality of the Nazi man in a concentration camp (Plath's marriage), we would be denying Plath the right to be that *Jewish* woman in her own voice and speak about herself. But Plath's careful usage of *may* suggests that she really may be that woman due to her background and downtrodden state in marriage; as for her father, in "Daddy" his exact origin is unknown: "So I never could tell where you/ Put your foot, your root" (*CP* 223). The unclear origin of the father adds to his ambivalent presence in Plath's prose and poetry ("The Colossus" and "Among the Bumblebees") and the entire poem reads as an insistent incantation, an exercise in exorcism – the ultimate removal of the father figure (Otto Plath and Ted Hughes) as a demon that has possessed Plath and marked all her life and works. However, the question comes yet again if Plath *had to* resort to the Jewish metaphor to describe what has been termed by many "weird luck" (Rose 22). Rose further points out that the *improper metaphor* has been perceived as *trivializing the Holocaust* or *aggrandizing her experience* "by stealing a historical event" (22), stating that Holocaust language, according to many, was supposed to stem from experience, not from fantasy (22). In her critique on "Daddy" Rose proposes instead an exploration of *fixing the meaning* (23) which is also what modern criticism does, "by asking what the representation of the Holocaust might tell us about this relationship between metaphor, fantasy and identification" (23).

As shown in *The Bell Jar*, Plath keeps identifying with the Jewish woman – Ethel Rosenberg (Esther Greenwood) and to the length of committing suicide on the date on which the Rosenbergs were denied clemency. In life and in her *Journals,* Plath also demonstrated her desire

to have children and the reason why she did not have more is Hughes's decision even though, allegedly, the English poet had a daughter with Assia Wevill. In that Plath also aligned with Jewish women who have felt that they must expiate for the victims of the Holocaust and rebuild the Jewish nation by bringing to the world as many children as possible. If Plath was part Jewish (albeit in her imagination), Hughes was not, but her insistent identification with Jewish women and their sufferings links the Holocaust experience to her state of womanhood. A *Journal* entry dated December 31 Wednesday (1958) provides a key to this obsession (reference to the short story "The Little Mining Town in Colorado"): "My present theme seems to be the awareness of a complicated guilt system whereby Germans in a Jewish and Catholic community are made to feel, in a scapegoat fashion, the pain, physically, the Jews are made to feel in Germany by Germans without religion" (*J* 453).

The second-person narrative offered in "Daddy", as Brain intimates from her essay "Sylvia Plath and You", is marked by semantic instability, but is rife with "a complex series of perspectives whose multiple angles deserve to be explored" (84) and this inherent trait of the poem has, no doubt, added to the controversies surrounding it. Just like the rock musician from Pink Floyd's *The Wall* we can safely say that Plath felt guilty for the horrendous crimes against the Jews committed by the Nazi Germans in the same way as she suffered from self-imputed guilt for the Americans dropping the atomic bomb over the Japanese cities (*J* 46-7). Likewise, in "Daddy", being Austrian-German and all-American, she keeps examining history with the clear realization that no conclusive answers can be obtained, hence the sense of painful guilt remains unassuaged and the rant against the father/ husband also imputes guilt to the Englishman for becoming a fascist without being German – the rock musician from *The Wall* who eventually identifies with the Nazis. The problem with (his)story being read by a woman is a tragic inescapable contradiction of terms – the story of the man who has caused the war and the subsequent inhuman suffering and the transference of guilt from the man to the woman because it was through her womb that man was born. By contrast, Plath is much more at ease when she is not mixing (his)story with her story as she does in "Lady Lazarus". Telling her own story of suicides, she,

as in history when dealing with important events, subjugates everyone, especially men, turning them to cogs of an almighty machine with their blunt stupor and mercantile ineffectuality. They are deprived of sensitivity and even human intelligence with the singular exception of the *Herr Doktor/ Herr Enemy* (*CP* 246), her eternal nemesis, who is in command, helping sustain a dystopic state where the intelligent individual is turned into a guinea pig for human experiments as in Sexton's "You, Doctor Martin" (Chapter 2). The medical personnel become the doctor's army and Lady Lazarus, the modified and still identical woman, rises from the ashes to seek revenge over men while remaining heterosexual, an illustration of the female predatory flower from *The Wall*.

Deprived of the *righteous* need to suffer within the Nazi-Jew context with the assumed and ascribed roles and with Ted Hughes having left her, unable to attain a comforting resolution for herself, the lyrical 'I' works herself up to a maddening crescendo: "There's a stake in your fat black heart/ And the villagers never liked you./ They are dancing and stamping on you./ They always *knew* it was you./ Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (*CP* 224).

Going over the points this study covers and highlighting what Plath's metaphoric representation of the Holocaust reveals for us, it would not be hard to give justice to her relating Hughes to the Nazi – his removal of the last three years of the *Journals* for whatever reasons might be likened to the Nazi's burning of books. Plath's depiction of man's physical brutality in "The Jailer" and barbarity in "The Rabbit Catcher", her comment on the signification of Hughes's "Hawk Roosting", the letter directly accusing him of domestic violence and Hughes's own blatant inconsideration or even mockery of Plath's dreams, which in his *Birthday Letters* are turned into delusions, complete this life-like portrayal of the man. But the most pertinent question is not whether this was all true, although we do not have many reasons to think it was not, or whether Plath had the right to use the metaphor, but rather what the perceived perpetration of these and similar attacks mean for a woman writer and for the readers of her works. This would suggest that there is the potential possibility of fascism in each one of us (Markov 37) and that by the metaphoricity of the Holocaust in Plath's and other writers' works, we can discover its

pestilential shoots. As Markov concludes: "our own fascism is at the center not only of our own social relations, but above all at the center of our own personal relations. It is even crueler and more frightening when it affects a wife, children, friends, close ones" (44).

Linda Wagner-Martin sees both poems as an expression of "triumphant women" (193) defeating patriarchy, "outdo[ing] her male competition in killing herself" (199), being "the same, identical woman" (*CP* 245). This critic sees "a persistent double consciousness of 'Lady Lazarus'" (199) and not as "the split self of alienation […] but a strategy for control" (199). Indeed, in both poems we must agree we have the woman against the man engaged in a veritable war of genders, but again here Plath is also at her utmost controversial – poems that give Plath such a strong feminist appeal until the reader finds the notorious line in "Daddy": "Every woman adores a Fascist" (*CP* 223) and remains forever baffled. Undoubtedly, here one will read Plath's adoration of both Hughes and her father whom she relates to *fascists*, but as Rose suggests, "the problem is only compounded by the ambiguity of the lines which follow" (46). While "the boot in the face" (*CP* 223) is the standard image of fascism or communism as in Orwell's *1984*, referred to "every woman" it would indicate the natural defenseless state of the heterosexual woman, including the Jewish, who can potentially become the recipient of physical (sexual) brutality and in that act, unlike in "Lady Lazarus", she does not become the predatory flower from *The Wall* which engulfs the man in the sexual act, completely devouring him, but is submitted to his physical power which again aspires to the man-God. In reference to Sexton's Snow White and her dirty unicorn dream, we could say that Plath predates it, verbalizes, and contextualizes it, endowing it with archetypal dimensions as would be Beauty and the Beast. In the context of the poem though, its presence is only related to the wrongful self-effacement of the woman before such man's power and in the context of Plath's ruined marriage, it suggests a realization, also confirmed in *The Bell Jar*, that not marrying a God is perhaps the way to go for a woman (Chapter 3). A marriage or a relationship with a more down-to-earth less narcissistic man might be more rewarding in the long run. In both poems the woman triumphs in language, in her capacity of the narrator of lived experience, the

demiurge of its fictionalized account which is the most satisfying in life when stripped of all mythology.

I will also briefly discuss the accusation that the two poems lack self-irony. That, indeed, seems to be the case. But "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are not novels, and we get our fair notion of Plath as a dark humorist in *The Bell Jar* (Chapter 3). As such Plath has few rivals in the world of women writers. Without attaining to the almost masculine self-irony of Zadie Smith in *White Teeth* comparable to Heller's *Catch 22* or Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Plath remains palpably feminine while managing to ironize herself on almost every page of the novel by showing how time and again her expectations are refuted by New York realities, thus making an important memorable commentary on the epoch. Plath, as it has been said here, was well aware of the differences between the genres of writing about oneself and we could say that in *Ariel* she approaches the classical definition of modern poetry provided by Wordsworth as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" with the clarification that these feelings will certainly shock and confuse, which would beckon a second reading. In that, she wrote poetry with a single purpose in mind, yet she oftentimes succeeded in comprising multiple related ideas building up to that purpose. Plath wanted to construct the image of the angry goddess and take her last farewell of the father figure and that is exactly what she did to a great effect. However, the few 1963 poems that survive, as it will be shown, are very different from anything in *Ariel* and contain a great deal of this element which is missing in these two.

If the analyst lets themselves be overwhelmed by "listening and seeing" (Simpson 26) rather than search for possible meanings, the latter will surely emerge in the process and what we have established on an analytical level can be confirmed or excluded during a purely auditory experience that the recital of the poem will produce and both "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are meant to be recited with a strong mnemonic effect of high sonority, feminine anger, resurrection and hatred of a woman's father/husband. They are both extremely personal and full of energy. The more one reads the poems in one's head and the more one becomes familiarized with the larger context that the poems necessitate, the more meanings will emerge as demonstrated in the analysis. To return to the original question: "Are they great poems?"

The answer to it must be positive since both manage to be highly melodious, thought-provoking, and unique in their own way of memorable lines and ideas which do not appear elsewhere in poetry as a full set; yet they neatly summarize Plath's own main concerns and anguish in life in a manner which is not lacking in a universal appeal.

3.2. "Edge" and "Words" – the perfected woman and the words left behind

"Words" and "Edge" are among the last poems that Plath wrote dated *1 February 1963* and *5 February 1963*, respectively, the latter being the last documented poem by Plath. Just like in Dubarova's "Secret", in "Words" one can observe a detachment from everything material. Departing from the material world in the form of words is a recurrent theme in Plath's later poetry and there are other poems containing similar ideas. From "The Disquieting Muses" (1957) where words have the power to bind in spells through "Ouija" (1957), where being under the sway of a King Lear-like old god, words become "locusts" (*CP* 77) and fill the air with platitudinous prattle to "The Net Menders" (1959) where they are accompanied by gesticulations to weave incantations, being likened to "web-threads" (*CP* 121). In "Last Words" dated *21 October 1961* the lyrical 'I' visualizes her own dying in detail and this visualization, described by words, persuasively creates a shimmering image of the poet in death surrounded by her favorite objects. Just like Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*, this world will be very special and responsive to the touch of those who want to establish contact with the poet no longer around with different aspects of her life getting illuminated as a result of the interaction. The people who come to this self-built mausoleum will be able to imagine and even feel her presence through the things around her which are summoned into existence by the poet's words. As Plath remarks, "I shall hardly know myself. It will be dark,/ And the shine of these small things sweeter than the face of Ishtar" (*CP* 172). Notably, Plath, as also shown in her *Journals*, does not believe in the ever-lasting presence of the human spirit, saying "I do not trust the spirit. It escapes like steam […]/ One day it won't come back" (*CP* 172). Words, however, are different – a projection of the author's consciousness, they are invested with lasting materiality. Not only will the last words reinstate a materialistic presence of the author in the visitors' different recreations, but they will

communicate with all the other words the poet has said and the readers will be able to build a literary image of the dead poet based on the readings they have made. This will be a dynamic image which will evolve with more readings, discussions with other readers and traveling to the places visited by the poet, until one can say that one knows Plath through all these words and images.

However, Plath does not trust words completely, either since their power depends on the others' openness to them. Recalcitrant people will ignore them or will be little affected by them and this imperviousness to them is in itself worthy of being described with words. In "New Year on Dartmoor" (1962) Plath depicts the natural wonder of a national park in Southern Devon, England and expresses her admiration for the inaccessible granite formations, saying that "there is no getting up it by the words you know" (*CP* 176). Likewise, it was next to impossible for her to convince Hughes of something he would not want to hear. But Plath admired his monolithic inaccessibility as much as she admires its granite reenactment in Devon as long as she had a reason to believe he was hers. In "Words Heard by Accident over the Phone" dated *11 July 1962*, we have the lyrical representation of Plath's strong suspicions of unfaithfulness on part of Ted Hughes, so desperately rendered in the insistent letters to Dr. Beuscher[79]. Words, even though true, become poison for a jealous Plath, or a pill hard to swallow and they take on a hue of the more impressionable very young Plath who, like Dubarova, would often use synesthesia in her early poetry. Here words become "mud" (*CP* 202), they are "thick as foreign coffee, and with a sluggy pulse" (*CP* 202). Plath makes sure that words assume an auditory effect: "They are plopping like mud" (*CP* 202). The telephone where she hears Assia Wevill looking for Ted Hughes grows slimy tentacles similar to Dos Passos's representations of mocking skyscrapers in *Manhattan Transfer*.

What are words for Plath in the wake of Hughes being gone for good, snow falling hard on London and very little if any hope for help

[79] Most of the letters were burned by both Plath and Dr. Ruth Beuscher. Plath and Beuscher had a strong relationship, which did not stop the doctor from selling her signed copy of *The Colossus* for $14,500 after Plath's death. – https://www.salon.com/2004/11/29/plath_therapist/ – a. n.

coming from anywhere? One could evoke Rupert Brooke's lines from "Dead Men's Love": "her limbs/ That had served Love so well,/ Dust, and a filthy smell" (29). This could read as "her words that had served Poetry so well" and then see what they are for Plath who feels she has lost everything she had and around which her life was built – her family (*The Letters*).

The poem begins with the ringing sound of wood being cut off with axes which could be symbolic of her life as she loved it being brutally attacked. The resounding cutting turns into echoes, galloping away like "horses" (*CP* 270), there is the sap from the hashed wood which could stand for blood and then the poet takes us ahead in time where we see a standard for Plath image of death having taken place years ago – the "white skull" (*CP* 270). The words encountered by the lyrical 'I' are "dry and riderless" (*CP* 270). The Romantic convention is completed by the presence of a pool in which the stars are reflected but the atmosphere is even staler than in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" where the errant knight, while walking in a dead forest, is able to connect romantically to the unattainable lady through his dream of the diva and the swift transformation into the powerful knight (himself) who takes her on his pacing steed. For Plath in this poem romanticism is dead beyond a glimmer of hope for a miraculous resurrection. The images are fixed in an evocation of Wallace Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice-cream" where we have: "Let the lamp affix its beam/ The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" (64), with influences by Stevens traced in other poetic pieces by Plath, too (Ranger 21). We have the defeatist and categorical "let be be finale of seem" (Stevens 64), the protagonist cannot even relate to the stars in the sky as the numerous examples given with the dying du Duve show (Chapter 3) – the world has shrunk to a parody of its beautiful romantic self – the stars are not in the sky, but reflected in the pool, they are "fixed" and they "govern life" (*CP* 270). The fully blended line then reads: "her words that had served Poetry so well/ dry and riderless" and pale.

If we take the forest symbolism in Plath at face value, we will get the following interpretation – the "wood" is herself – there is one tree – no longer do we have a pluralistic protagonist referring to Ted and Sylvia as we do in Plath's early works after 1956 (Hughes's *Birthday Letters* attest to Plath's having little to show for it). We do, however,

have "axes", standing for the numerous factors against Plath's family – Plath's lack of support from friends in England, Hughes's parents and sister, the rival women. The actually lived experience – the cut tree (herself) whose killing was terrifying to behold is rendered through powerful words which initially closely reflected the magnitude of the destruction. Over the course of the years, with their author already dead, they have become gradually dissociated from the actual event. They are the same identical words, describing the same lived experience – the *horses*, but unrelated to the author and have lost much of their initial energy. Disconnected from their narrow context and roaming in mysterious ways they reach the random reader who takes them as such and who, if referring to their author, will naturalistically see *a skull*, not the exuberant lively woman with intensifying bouts of depression who was their author – an image which corresponds closely to Plath's imagined death and last words from the eponymous poem from 1961.

As already shown in her *Journals*, as early as her twenties, Plath was aware of the impossibility to render an experience one had gone through with the adequate words (Chapter 2) which would reflect its intensity or significance for the author. However, one could always try, and one could always write with the sensation that the rendition was satisfying. Plath knew that exaggeration and understatement were part of writing about herself and so whenever she could, she employed multiple modes of reproducing a lived event, modifying her writing according to the genre specifics. The most powerful reproduction, undoubtedly, is to be found in her poetry, which is also the richest in meanings. In the face of death, just like with Keats's "When I have Fears", words were failing her since she could only imagine bleakness and darkness, and Keats – blankness and emptiness. In that both were mistaken since although physically no longer among the living, the words they used are among the most recognizable in world poetry, their lives – among the most illuminated and their works – among the most discussed; consequently, in the words they wrote and that we keep reading, their consciousness lives on.

In "Edge" Plath presents the "perfected woman" (*CP* 272) and she has reached her perfection because she is dead and there can be no more claims to things that could be improved in her. It should be noted that Plath even in her last poem is linguistically precise – the woman is

not "perfect" but made perfect. To achieve this state of utmost detachment from herself, Kendall suggests that Plath operates on a level of split self and split consciousness (153). And indeed, one feels strained to imagine how otherwise Plath could have achieved the calm and stately portrayal of the infanticide scene in which the feminine subject is lying dead with one child at either side. The depiction is certainly chilling and is reminiscent of a ritualistic suicide: "Each child coiled, a white serpent,/ One at each little/ Pitcher of milk, now empty./ She has folded/ Them back into her body as petals/ Of a rose close when the garden/ Stiffens and odors bleed/ From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower" (*CP* 272-3). Everyday objects, part of raising two infants in the early 1960s, have found their place into the voyeuristic exposure to the gaze on the dead woman and her children. The description is sensuous – with Keatsean and Wildean motifs – the *rose*, the *petals*, *odors*, the *deep throats*, the *bleeding*, the *night flower*. Most of them can be found in a different arrangement in Keats's grandiose "Ode to a Nightingale" and Wilde's orientalistic opening of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as in many of his *Fairy Tales*, for example in "The Nightingale and the Rose". Here they appear oddly jumbled but sequenced in elegant lines. Eerily enough, being entwined about her body like petals, the children appear partially alive as they slowly unfold and close, being the petals of the rose, and the woman, while she looks embalmed, in her position of the rose, retains some vestigial life sufficient to command the movements of the petals. Rereading this passage and following the voluptuous and unnerving slow-motion movements of the children-petals under the night sky, one gets the sensation that one has not seen too well, that perhaps one is witnessing yet another transformation – the woman turning into a flower, with her children who have come to the world from her womb, returning to her sides in an act that is surreal but made to look almost natural. The reader can only wish that the spell somehow would break and suddenly everyone from the framed composition would start making more human-like movements signifying their return to humanity and life as we know it.

Kendall notes that the "higher consciousness' is her [Plath's] poetic imagination" (154) and only the act of writing allows the implementation of a "Jungian affect" and "outgrowing the self" (154).

The *affect* in question refers to the capacity of certain patients to be able to grow another level of consciousness and split their selves so that the *higher consciousness* is able to describe the actual condition of the patients as if it did not concern them, while, at the same time realizing, with a *lower consciousness*, that they *were* concerned. Whether that was the case, or it was simply Plath's obsession with images of death and their pertaining aesthetics which allowed her to detach herself from what affected her directly to provide the most revealing description, it is hard to know. Undeniably, Plath possessed a unique dark vision among women writers, her elegant later writing rivalling or even arguably surpassing that of Sexton.

Another difference that can be noted, if we compare this poem and "Words" to the *Ariel* poems, is the detachment of the lyrical speaker from the actual protagonist. *Ariel* thus is a rather life-affirming collection, brimming with energy, portraying time and again the lyrical 'I' as overcoming adversity, putting suicide behind. The poems after *Ariel* from 1963 under consideration here have moved in another direction. Their main preoccupation seems to be the physical and literary presence of the dead writer for posterity. While the physical parts, as shown in "Words" can be reduced to the *skull*, the literary afterlife is uncertain. But in "Edge" Plath is beyond that already. The most pertinent thing to her seems to be what she must have felt would be her imminent transformation, crossing the world of the dead, yet lingering in the world of the living, as in Rossetti's "Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay" (102). This is done via the voiceover technique which allows glimpses as much further ahead as she wishes and here she wishes to dwell on the woman-rose with her children-petals as they are crossing over, or perhaps, in a delusional tracing of the movements of the woman-plant, about to return to life. If we consider the early story "Ocean 1212-W" and Plath as a child about to grow gills but being pulled back at the last moment before being overwhelmed by the sea wave (Chapters 1, 2), the woman here is yet on another threshold, having become a plant and the gills – petals. Both herself and the petals are technically alive although as a woman she is dead with her lifeless appendages – the children, a vegemorphic transformation which excludes human life while the zoomorphic one from the short story might have allowed it had it been completed.

The last two couplets of the poem are both in line with what we may expect but also at variance with our expectations and their introduction is signaled with an abrupt change of the enchanting rhythm of the preceding ones to lines where the meter is disrupted: "The moon has nothing to be sad about,/ Staring from her hood of bone./ She is used to this sort of thing./ Her blacks crackle and drag" (*CP* 273). It seems that the lyrical speaker in her *higher consciousness*, if we use the term proposed by Kendall, or detached state, is mocking at the reader, having lulled him or her to a state of hypnosis. The moon appears to be grotesquely imitating the sleek movements in death of the woman and her children and that in the child's image shared by Aurelia – little Sylvia seeing the moon's halo as "witch's hair" (*Sylvia Plath*, Chapter 1). However, the moon appearing to be immobile is here as if nailed to the night sky, so its movements are rusty and menacing, creating the sensation of its being stabbed by multiple daggers. Again, a possible interpretation of the extended image could be a parody of Juliet's suicide in yet another refutation of a romantic interpretation with all the romantic images in place, and that because of Romeo who has abandoned his Juliet and the two children as both his legacy and liability. The finale of the poem seems to be mocking in more than one way at the "perfected woman" who is only so in the attempt at perfection, but the mocking moon is forever denying her a true perfection in death.

Kendall asks the question brought up by Bloom and namely: "How to read the woman's achievement?" (163). Commenting on "Edge", the critic concludes: "It provides no 'taxonomic words' because it defies existing categories. We are still learning how to read Plath's later work. Poetry offers few more challenging and unsettling experiences" (164). I believe, this critic's tempered praise, which could also be read as a tacit disapproval, has not reflected all the immanent ideas in the poem. These two poems, "Words" and "Edge", alongside the already demonstrated hidden possible interpretations, also offer a great deal of irony and self-irony missing in *Ariel* based on the discrepancy between the lyrical 'I' and the subject, which has allowed Plath to provide a complex multiple prism system of perception and reception.

Rather than attack the poems for their new levels of *shock and awe* compared to *Ariel* or criticize them for not offering a very different kind of entertainment, we could concentrate, as Rose proposes in her discussion of "Daddy", on what Plath has actually done. In the present analysis, we can see the poet's return to her education in classical English and American literature and namely the Romantic poets with a certain reference to Keats and the late Victorian/ pre-Modernist Wilde. As the analysis has shown, Plath has made a postmodernist use of the already available images from Keats's sensuous representations of nature and Wilde's orientalist prelude, employing a variety of conceits which under Ihab Hassan's categorization of Postmodernism boil down to the following: *dadaism* – in the highly playful unorthodox representations of words in both poems and the portrayal of the dead woman in "Edge" based on seemingly random romantic words sequenced together, which requires multiple readings. *Disjunctive* – both later poems, more than "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" invite many interpretations with none of them being conclusive. *Participation* – the reader is required to know well both Plath's child's phantasms and classical English and American literature; once s/he knows them, identification with the subject might be possible but only in a dialogue of acceptance or refusal of Plath's offering. Here "Words" seems much more appealing and humane whereas "Edge" comes out as one of the sleekest and most unsettling horrors ever created. *Decreation/ Deconstruction* – both poems work with classical romantic conventions, but these are deconstructed and well-integrated into the late 1950s and early 1960s domesticity to create something strikingly original which invites even more interpretations. *Dispersal* – occasional moments of normality intersperse both poems which adds even more to the overall unsettling sensation they produce. *Intertextuality* – references to specific works by the mentioned classical writers as well as to Plath's earlier reworked tropes. *Irony* – as discussed, fully present here. *Indeterminacy* – while both poems appear to offer certain endings, we feel we could go on with our excursions into prophetism, knowing fully well the magnitude of the undying interest in and posthumous critical appreciation of Plath's works. *Immanence* – Plath's poems certainly present experiences within the possible while offering a solid dose of *epistemic disobedience*.

"Daddy", "Lady Lazarus", "Words" and "Edge" are only four of many more poems that can be considered representative of Plath's multifaceted poetry treating marriage and death. Still, they are also key pieces both for *Ariel* and the few poems that were written immediately before Plath's death. All four poems deal with the aftermath of Hughes' defection from his marriage, but as the analysis has demonstrated, they are also high artistic achievements which remain open to new interpretations and analyses. One can only regret that Plath's life was taken so early and that with the literary production exploring her life in such creative ways, Plath could have achieved so much more. A more affirmative answer as to her achievement is given by Brain who, from the critical perceptions of 2019 neatly synthesizes Plath's uncanny appeal to readers worldwide in both her prose and poetry, something that D. F. Wallace aimed to do in his *Infinite Jest*: "One of the fundamental ways that Plath makes readers 'feel less alone' is having her fictional characters and poetic persona speak to them directly" (84). As it stands, her poetic legacy is rich and welcoming of new studies in American literature of the 1950s and 1960s as well as of other comparative ventures where lived experience is well reflected in fiction.

3.3. The last letter to the doctor – the salvation that never came

The last preserved letter that Plath wrote was to Dr. Beuscher stamped 23 Fitzroy Road, London N. W.1., February 4, 1963. In this letter she seems to have recollected herself from the heavy blow of Ted's leaving her and wears a serene look with which she comments on her present state. She shares that "Ted says he'll try to pay us about $280 a month while I try to make up the rest by writing" (2: 960), which suggests that until the last moment she was trying to make ends meet and survive in London. Plath summarizes what she believes has happened between herself and Ted in her marriage thus: "I have finally read the Fromm[80] & think that I have been guilty of what he calls 'Idolatrous love', that I lost myself in Ted instead of finding myself,

[80] Erich Fromm (1900 – 1980) – a German social psychologist, psychoanalyst, and humanistic philosopher; a German Jew he fled Nazi Germany to the USA and wrote his key works *Escape from Freedom* (1941), *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (1950), *The Sane Society* (1955) and *The Art of Loving* (1956). – a. n.

and this was why deeply underneath the marvelous loving, the writing, the babies I feared his loss, his leaving me & depended on him more & more, making him both idol & father" (2: 960), thus agreeing with Frances McCullough who makes a similar observation. Post-factum, undeniably, things must have looked like this, but Plath should hardly blame herself for loving Hughes too much. It is only a realization, but realizations like these, I believe, actually stop people from loving the right people when they finally meet them – that is, those who could be their lifelong companions. They put certain barriers to their feelings and forbid themselves to love unconditionally. As a result, they miss out on the possibility of a wonderful, reciprocated love, the *beautiful adventure* that du Duve speaks of in *Cargo vie*. She believes she can overcome the lasting separation and forthcoming divorce and that she will be able to find herself eventually. But then, like the uneven disruptive rhythm in her last poems, she signals a new danger: "What appals [sic] me is the return of my madness, my paralysis, my fear & vision of the worst---cowardly withdrawal, a mental hospital, lobotomies[81]" (2: 960). And then provides more justification: "Perhaps this is accentuated by my seeing Ted once a week when he comes to see Frieda---seeing how happy & whole & independent he is now, how much more I admire him like this, & what good friends we could be if I could manage to grow up too" (2: 960). The letter shows that Plath never stopped loving Ted Hughes, that she has accepted her lot of being abandoned by him, but that she still cannot be indifferent to the fact that he took Assia Wevill to Spain where she had so many happy moments during her honeymoon, despite the already discussed situation of herself and Ted being at odds with each other haunted by the intrusive sense of "wrongness". The letter, unlike the other preserved letters to her psychiatrist, bears the sense of detachment we find in the last poems and is much shorter by comparison.

In discussing her returned depression, Plath shows that she realizes the severe condition she is in, as well as the fact that it is categorized as "madness". The way she feels about it is that she is in a

[81] Making incisions into the prefrontal lobe of the brain was formerly used to treat mental illness. So, Plath had a good reason to fear that her depression would be treated with brain incisions. – a. n.

state of war, that every day is a survival, and she is aware that she needs to find an algorithm for making it possible: "I need a ritual for survival from day to day until I begin to grow out of this death & found Fromm's recommendation for concentration, patience & faith gave me a kind of peace, but that I keep slipping into this pit of panic & deepfreeze" (2: 961). These lines show that Plath was also well aware of the morbidity running through her writings, as well as her desire to be able to overcome it and write differently. Until that happened, she would be writing from the depths of despair, but with a voice different from Cioran's. The title of her last poem also appears here as an idea: "I feel written [the new poems] on the edge of madness" (2: 961). Plath also testifies to her realizing that she was "narcissistic" (2: 961). Despite the rationalization she provides of the events happening around her, Plath, just as in *The Bell Jar*, registers the objective difficulties depression posed: "Just now it is a torture to me to dress, plan meals, put one foot in front of the other […] No-one can save me but myself, but I need help & my doctor is referring me to a woman psychiatrist" (2: 961). Plath never made use of the new psychiatrist's services. The doctor's arrival was late by a couple of days. It was the same with the au-pair who, when arriving at Plath's building, could not enter – Plath had already committed suicide. The last part of the letter reveals once again and even more clearly Plath's problem:

> I am, for the first time since my marriage, relating to people without Ted, but my own lack of center, of mature identity, is a great torment. I am aware of cowardice in myself, a wanting to give up. If I could study, read, enjoy people on my own Ted's leaving me would be hard, but manageable. But there is this damned, self-induced freeze. I am suddenly in agony, desperate, thinking Yes, let him take over the house, the children, let me just die & be done with it. How can I get out of this ghastly defeatist cycle & grow up. I am only too aware that love and a husband are impossibilities to me at this time, I am incapable of being myself & loving myself. Now the babies are crying, I must take them out to tea. With love, Sylvia (2: 961).

This letter sounds almost normal in view of Plath's returned condition, that is, we have the American poet with the understandable difficulties she was in, with all her realizations about what was not right, even with the understanding that the man she had considered an indelible part of her family and herself now belongs to another woman

and even the bigger admiration she has for him because he appears to be *whole*, *happy*, and *independent*. Plath's own condition, as she admits, is bordering on madness and "Edge", in light of the letter, has clearly captured yet again Plath's recurrent volatile state. The letter, like so many to her psychiatrist, is a cry for help, for preventing the horrible experiences in the mental hospital described with such intensity in *The Bell Jar* ten years after the actual events (Chapter 3). Notably, the text also reveals Plath's resignation and acceptance of what she had come to consider her fate. The repetitive "deep-freeze" invoking the stupor of Dickinson's *letting go* should have been a wake-up call, but for some reasons, mostly unknown to date, Plath never received the help she so badly needed. Her razor-sharp descriptions of incidents and states related to her illness are quoted as precise signs of clinical depression perhaps based on a bipolar disorder. The letters to her psychiatrist even largely unanswered continue to be valuable literature on the condition. They did not save Plath but certainly have helped diagnose and treat others. *The Bell Jar* and her *Journals*, apart from their purely literary merits, are also quoted in medical literature as in Frederick K. Goodwin and Key Redfield Jamison's highly informative *Manic-Depressive Illness: Bipolar Disorders and Recurrent Depression* (2009) where passages are cited in their entirety and discussed (68, 69, 70).

3.4. The self-sufficient woman and the "Brave New World": *The Spider's Web* and *Memories*

In her *Memories* Serghi wonders about Camil Petrescu: "Had he experienced, or had he imagined the husband-wife conflict in his works?" (55). It is a good question to ask since his subtility of portraying the female characters, even with the help of herself, remains very impressive. Still, it seems there was more than a grain of true experience in Petrescu's life when he was warned he was making a mistake with his first wife. He seems to have had a premonition about it for Serghi claims he said: "I want to suffer through her and only through her!" (55). Petrescu also affirms: "About war and about marriage you can never tell the whole truth" (Serghi 56), but Serghi claims that it was true of Camil, "that you could never know the whole truth about him" (56). Serghi examines Petrescu's life and published works, and the comparative analysis renders results she considers to be true of his life undisclosed to the public. She also quotes him to have

said: “Literature is a sort of a barricade in a fortress. For myself it is an accumulated result, a sort of the essence of a life lived” (57). It is quite interesting to note that a writer who did not think highly of writing autofictions and who thought lived experience was supposed to be modified beyond recognition, acknowledged his own life in his literary works.

The desire to suffer for a cause can also be found in other writers, including the ones part of this study. For instance, Plath, while quite young at Smith, said in her *Journals*: “I am afraid. I am not solid, but hollow. I feel behind my eyes a numb, paralyzed cavern, a pit of hell, a mimicking nothingness. I never thought, I never wrote, I never suffered. I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb. I do not know who I am, where I am going” (*J* 273). In “De Profundis” Wilde writes to Alfred Douglas: “Where there is sorrow there is holy ground. Some day you will realise what that means” (1422). It is easy to understand the very young Plath who wants to connect to life-changing events and go through shattering experiences, and ironically enough she enters Wilde’s paradox of the real tragedy “of getting it” in her life enwrapped in domesticity. Wilde writes from the Reading Gaol in a manner stripped of all pretenses to his signature Dandyism and cynicism and expresses in two sentences the underlining theme of his *Fairy Tales* and novel. The young Petrescu is the one who wants to relate it to marriage, perhaps thinking of Socrates’s “By all means, marry. If you get a good wife, you’ll be happy. If you get a bad one, you’ll become a philosopher.” In all three cases suffering is not only life-changing but defining and building one’s character. With these writers, it has been the necessary stimulus, the unextinguishable flame at the core of their major works. To this list we must also add Cella Serghi since her *The Spider’s Web* among other things is mainly the story of a woman (herself) who suffers bitterly for being married to a man whom she does not love and loving a man she cannot marry. Except for Wilde who knew bitter suffering firsthand because of the imprisonment for his homosexual relationship with Douglas, the other three had it related to heterosexual marriage whether they wanted to or not. Their trying to find answers to a question that concerned them directly has resulted in mature works of fiction and autofiction. Going through depression, resulting from her unhappy

marriage, Serghi offers a different solution to Chopin's *The Awakening* and to Plath's end of life which can be viewed as the autofictional experience of a *bildungsroman*, all the examined poems, letters, journals, and the novel having been considered chronologically. The resolution of the impasse Serghi finds herself in – divorced and with no chance of becoming Petrescu's wife is based on several differences to Plath's situation.

The first difference from Plath (Esther or the lyrical speaker in so many poems) is the fact that Serghi (Diana) does not seem to ever have tried to create an eternal father-figure of her husband or beloved. When she married, her father was still among the living. However, she, as demonstrated both in her novel and in *Memories*, reevaluated her ambivalent feelings towards him (similar to those of Plath's) at the very end of his life and immediately after his death. Seni was often indifferent to her emotional world while Petrescu was often too busy to really care. Her real reconnection with her father though begins after his death when she is able to reflect on everything he was and still is to her in some of the most moving passages about a father-daughter connection in World Literature, as demonstrated in her novel (246-264), and especially when she is able to see her father through the eyes of those who knew him from work (392-3). This new perception of the world allows her to see herself as her father's daughter and be proud of it, resuming her father's family name, having finally given up trying to connect to either Petrescu (Alex) or Seni (Michi). This involves a reevaluation of all the difficult moments she had with him and seeing in him a rare thing for a father – his self-denialism as the underlining motif of his decisions. As for her mother, in her novel Serghi speaks with love of her unlike Plath's representation of Aurelia in *The Bell Jar*. Naturally, not without certain disagreements, especially when it comes to getting married to anyone who would take her without a dowry.

The second difference is Serghi's dramatic gest to leave Bucharest and everything that oppressed her in a loveless marriage, which the Romanian writer decided to dissolve and so she managed to get to Paris where she had Romanian friends and spent 30 days there in which she saw 34 spectacles, with some morning performances included (Serghi 110). In *The Spider's Web* Diana shows more timidity than its creator and does not get farther than Cologne, Germany after

which she comes back to Bucharest desirous to return to Michi and her marriage, but then she is served the cold shower of learning that he believes she is an easy woman who has had numerous affairs with men (382-4). Unlike Plath who stayed in London and who needed to overcome certain catholic prejudices in the people she communicated with, Serghi (Diana) had to fight the profoundly patriarchal attitudes of Bucharest and Romania before she left and even more after she returned and so find and save herself, just like Plath, without much external help. Like Plath again, in the novel Diana has her Ilinka Dima, her bosom friend (alter ego) who performs the role of her psychiatrist, like Ruth Beuscher (Dr Nolan), often disapproving and not always responding on time.

The third difference from Plath is that Serghi finally managed to find a paying job in Bucharest – becoming a literary chronicler, having previously worked as an assistant for lawyers without being paid as part of her study practice. Arguably, Plath's position was aggravated by comparison, because she had to look after her children and, she was in another country, remaining an American alien in the English society after Hughes left. Plath was an American immigrant while Serghi was only an internal immigrant making her way from Constanța to the capital. The fact that Serghi was finally working something she liked and was being paid for cannot be overstated. Working when one feels depressed is hard, but it is the way to go, if the sufferer can actually do it. It just has to be something one likes and where one could achieve another sense of detachment from his or her ailing soul. Performing and teaching jobs are excellent for that purpose, but Plath's teaching experience at Smith was not the happiest for her – she found she had no time for writing. Otherwise, this could have been a solution and something to look forward to, battling depression every day. With the harsh winter conditions and no real possibility of digitized distance learning and real-time online classes, the possibilities were drastically limited. The letter therapy Plath tried with Dr Beuscher did not work since she rarely received a response from across the Atlantic.

The fourth difference was the social involvement. Serghi was unquestionably much more integrated in the culture life of the Romanian capital, mingling with writers and being friends with some of the most promising ones of the epoch – Camil Petrescu and Mihail

Sebastian. Plath seems to have been much shier and really pressed for time in the English capital. Although dreaming of becoming integrated in the cultural life of the city, one of the very few people she saw and who was part of this life, was Alvarez from *The Observer*. Unfortunately, she could only see him in his position of chief editor and when they met, they talked shop – only about her poems. When she says she is "apartment hunting" in Alvarez's study on suicide, he claims she mentioned that herself and Hughes were separated temporarily – she kept appearances alive while her letters to Dr Beuscher from the same period speak of a final separation. She did not know that he was a kindred spirit and that he had had his unsuccessful suicide. She really could have received help from him with her depression, but she did not know, and neither did Alvarez.

The fifth and most important difference was the fact that Plath had a serious medical condition while Serghi (Diana) did not have the symptoms of severe clinical depression; it was rather a passing phase occasioned by the rejection of her husband and the unwillingness of her beloved to fully commit to a relationship. In her case it was aggravated by the fact that she was returning to an empty room since she was not sharing it with anyone and Serghi's novel features many scenes of unspeakable dejection, accompanied by the unfounded hope that the telephone will ring, and it will be Michi who wants her back. Some of the signs of depression, however, are there – persistent insomnia and a sense of despair. After one final conversation Diana is accused of being promiscuous, which she does not even have the force to negate. Even though she knows he is not the man for her, his abandoning her is too much since Diana feels that there is no one to connect to and that she is completely lost. Her sacrifices, convictions, aspirations, and dreams – just illusions so the underlining sense of depression is triggered instantly into visibility, as it happens with Esther in New York, based on an accumulative effect of emotional shocks:

> My temples were ringing, I felt cold. I was sobbing hard. The night had crept into the window. The loneliness around me began to weigh heavy on me. I was afraid of it. I made my bed to climb under the blanket, after that I hastily undressed and turned off the lights. But the darkness frightened me. I turned it back on again. Much later I plucked up courage and I turned it off completely. Again, I was in the dark. The

> wind was wailing lugubriously, hitting the windowpanes, I could feel its coldness on my shoulders. I walked groping my way to the bed. There I knelt, trying to form a prayer, like I would in my childhood, when in Kniajovo[82], in the grass where I had lost my ball, or when I had lost my mum at the Mamaya train station. The wind groaned as groaned the siren at Constanța when I was a child. […] The wind wailed in desperation as if having brought all the sorrows from all over the world before the house. I remembered I was kneeling so I could pray. And I said: 'My Lord, help me! I don't know how, in what manner, but help me… Help me to get used to loneliness… to find my way, to find a sense of living…' (383-4)

Although very young, in her early twenties, Diana (Serghi) feels depressed because of her long struggle with poverty, patriarchal prejudice, indifferent husband (living in his own world of exact sciences), constant display of coquetry on her part and all this to no avail, when she cannot even be with her beloved. This is all augmented to gigantic proportions because of the final rejection of her husband and so Serghi finds herself, like Plath, alone but without children. Just like Plath who wanted to be an all-American girl, Serghi wanted to be an all-Romanian girl and her partial Bulgarian identity[83] did not make matters any easier. While *The Spider's Web* makes this clear in several scenes where Serghi takes a cautious attitude expressing sympathy with Bulgaria and the Bulgarians, *Memories* is clearly Romanian nationalist and Bulgaria as a state does exist in the text.

As already demonstrated, there is a visible change that Diana goes through when feeling that there is no hope for her – it is when she finds a job. The parallel non-fictional reality of the situation was when Serghi received words of strong encouragement from Sebastian and Rebreanu for her novel (Serghi 257) and when she did nail the chronicler job a bit after. Although both literary dignitaries advise her to revise and remove certain material, the young writer feels she has said everything and that there is nothing that can be removed and again suicide creeps into her reflections – if her life had so much suffering in it, then its autofictional rendition into text could be nothing short of a

[82] Kniajevo, Sofia is where Serghi's (Diana's) family moves for a short period in her father's endless search for a job. – a. n.
[83] Explored in *The Different Dobruja between the Wars* (207). – a. n.

deliverance; it could be made meaningful through sharing her trials and tribulations with the world. And so Serghi asks rhetorically: "Was suicide then a psychosis?" (257). And she turns the question to Petrescu reformulated: "Is it inconceivable that I did not kill myself for Camil Petrescu?" (260).

But Cella Serghi also had friends and the best one of them was Mihail Sebastian whose intelligent critical commentaries and well-intentioned advice were always of good use and all of her writing in *The Spider's Web*, even when recounting terrible events, is done with care for the reader, with a desire to share an experience which is no longer only personal and which, as the pages of *Memories* tell us, is rendered to paper with the utmost precision sometimes laced with fantasy – the love story with Alex. One could say that the many pages of authentic lived experience with verisimilar intensity in the novel creating physical sensations have made possible for the love story to appear completely authentic as well.

While *The Bell Jar* ends upon a note of quiet optimism with "Words' and "Edge" transcending represented life on the Earth as we know it, and Plath's last preserved letter showing a cool detachment and a rather transparent resignation, Serghi's novel, as already shown, features a modernist flare of a physically and spatially reordered world which offers the narrator's brand-new perspective. From this point of view, Plath's and Serghi's autofictional endings could not be farther apart. If we consider the ending of Serghi's novel and Plath's last poem, both writers have used the cutting-edge techniques of Modernism and Postmodernism, respectively, to a maximum effect. It should be noted that Serghi's radiant depiction of a physically transforming Bucharest neighborhood is quite remarkable and in tone is reminiscent of Woolf's postwar *flaneurist* portrayal of London in *Mrs Dalloway*. In both, the perspective is certainly that of the feminine protagonist with the difference that in Serghi, the character is able to see the changing world from the same window that has so often offered bleak views of the same place, but these views have up to this moment been devoid of clarity. We can recall the scene and admire once again its serenity, from the eyes of the new woman looking upon the world, a much brighter winter by comparison to Plath's:

> Look, the houses have become walls at irregular rows. Now and again, a little square is illuminated… then a lantern lit up. The snow on the roofs is whiter now, contrasting violently with the grayness of the coming night. An automobile, like a black animal, grows bigger, coming round the corner, on the curved road, and turns left, then comes a woman, turning right: on the same road there is a little girl running with a headscarf. And again, a light illuminates a window, then another and yet another… (398).

The very ending is of pure radiance identifying the sensation of living in the big city with an illuminating ecclesiastical experience – another, positive resurrection which does not unleash the terrible energy of "Lady Lazarus", but allows the reborn individual to reconnect to the urban animal world in a sacred communion basked in light:

> Nevertheless, I don't feel lonely anymore. Curiously, I no longer feel cold. A sparrow perched on the balcony edge, moved its head to one side and then another, looking, and then flew off. Several pigeons traversed the street over the houses, white with brown spots. Church bells toll. Could it be Sunday? I find myself smiling without knowing why. A sunbeam materializes obliquely from an opening in a sky of opaque smoke, like in the icons portraying the Resurrection (400).

Serghi's resurrection both in life and in her novel was made possible without going through actual suicide and still it feels like a genuine reawakening to life, when, all of a sudden, life has meaning once again. The comparative reading of the two female writers in the last two chapters has showcased Serghi's entirely feminine sensibility contrasted to what has been perceived to be a mixture in Plath – a fascinating binary of both masculine and feminine writing: "with language that is curiously masculine in its knotted, vigorous quality, combined with an alert, gay, sometimes whimsical sensibility that is wholly feminine" (May 75). Despite the insistent 'I' speaker in both, in discussing the power of the "You" narrative in Plath, Brain qualifies this mode as "second nature" (85) to her owing to her prolific letter writing, which definitely makes Plath the more dialogical of the two. With the dialogue in Plath's letters to her doctor completely failing, and all the known circumstances in effect, Plath's tragedy was chronologically foretold well in advance. So, Harding reminds us: "To Plath, the 1950s were not a brief, backward moment between the

Second World War and the Age of Aquarius, but her day-to-day lived experience of the adult world, with no end in sight" (180).

As demonstrated in the continued comparative analysis between Serghi's and Plath's portrayals of marriage, the two women writers were far from living in a "married bliss" and with Plath ending her own life at the very beginning of the 1960s, it is her literary selves that have transcended the epoch; as for their author, she remains, as Clark put it, "caught in a limbo between icon and cliché" (360), "mythologized and pathologized, in movies, television and biographies as a high priestess of poetry, obsessed with death" (360). Overcoming adversity was not easy for Serghi, either, but she found the strength in herself to go on living to the dawn of post-socialist democracy in Romania, outliving by far her fellow writers from the 1930s. Through this study its author has aimed not only to showcase comparable feminine experiences in different epochs but effectuate an analysis of the possible causes and solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems in life as represented in autofiction. Without downplaying in the least the true devastating power of depression, reading beyond one's culture can certainly yield usable solutions. Surely, Cioran's words referring to the meaning in life sound challenging: "Couldn't we live without this world having one?" (152), savoring Keats's sensuous reproduction of the simple joys of life from "Endymion" expressed in "sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing./[…] spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth/ Of noble natures, of the gloomy days" (187). Could we add to it, as Serghi proposes from the closing pages of her novel, also the joy of reading? And read both Serghi and Plath for the pure joy of establishing a connection in our minds between two fascinating worlds?

Spoken from the horse's mouth, the words of Alvarez sound a dire warning to everyone who believes they have had enough: "I discovered for myself, in my own body and on my own nerves, that death is simply an end, a dead end, no more, no less. And I wonder if that piece of knowledge isn't in itself a form of death. After all, the youth who swallowed the sleeping pills and the man who survived are so utterly different that someone or something must have died" (272).

CHAPTER 5: PLATH'S AUTOFICTIONAL SELVES IN COMPARISON AND WORLD LITERATURE

Got a Letter from Münevver Saying
by Nâzim Hikmet
Nazım, tell me about the city where I was born.
I was still little when I left Sofia, but they say I knew Bulgarian...
What kind of city is it?
I heard from my mother Sofia is small, but it must have grown -
just think, it's been 41 years.
I remember the Boris Park. My nanny took me there mornings.
It must be the biggest park in Sofia.
I still have pictures of me taken in it... a park with lots of sunshade.
Do sit there. Maybe you'll run across the bench where I played.
But benches don't last 40 years; they'd have rotted and been replaced.
Trees are best - they outlive memories.
One day, go sit under the oldest chestnut.
Forget everything, even our separation - just think of me.
(translated by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk, New York, 1994)[84]

1. "What's in a chestnut tree?"

The poem by Nâzim Hikmet entitled "Got a Letter from Münevver Saying" based on a letter from the correspondence of over 400 letters with his then common-law partner Münevver Andaç while he was an immigrant in Sofia, Bulgaria, and she was stranded in Istanbul, Turkey, can be used as a postcard illustration of a literary work as part of World Literature. They were separated by hundreds of kilometers which generated a sentimental text from the first French translator of Orhan Pamuk turned into a brilliant poem by the most internationally recognized Turkish poet in exile. Created as an enquiry by the Sofia born Münevver Andaç and pointing to a certain location

[84] Published in "After Nazim Hikmet's footsteps in Boris Park." Hurriyet (03.06.2009) by Borsa, Canlı, Altın Fiyatları and Döviz Kurları için Bigpara. Retrieved on 24.07. 2021, https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/after-nazim-hikmet-s-footsteps-in-boris-park-11781131. – a. n.

which could potentially be found, the poem now circulates beyond its culture of origin and in translation. That way, Boris Park (Borisova Gradina) has become a place of pilgrimage for the many Turkish and international admirers of Hikmet, a Bulgarian city has glowed brightly on the literary and tourist map of the world, two neighboring countries have found yet another point of connection, through a non-existent bench and a mythical chestnut tree…

In *What is World Literature* David Damrosch asks a pertinent question: "Which literature? Whose world?" (1). He qualifies the term as "extraordinarily elusive" (1) and proceeds by providing a tentative definition which describes the phenomenon at the core of which is a story of Eckermann's pilgrimage to Goethe who himself becomes his visitor's metaphor of the newly coined term (*Weltliteratur*): "he is form too alluring not to be striven after, and too great to be reached" (2). If this could be an unattainable goal for a humble literary attempt, Damrosch has a simpler, more inclusive definition: "I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (4). The critic then clarifies that that work needs to be actively present in "the literary system beyond that of the original culture" (4) for it to act as such. This early definition of World Literature – from 2003 answers a vital question – are all translated literary works World Literature? The requirement for active use of the translation or original in the other culture(s) creates problems because, evidently, not all translated literary works or originals can enjoy this privilege or have this luck. Indeed, the elusiveness of the term poses a challenge not only for the literary critic, but also to the writer who may be harboring the secret hope that his or her work will find its place in World Literature as a passive translation, hardly as an original, with the possibility of being awakened so it can enjoy its brief moments of fame. There are many representatives of American and English literature who have found the key and Plath is certainly one of them – posthumously her works circulate both in the original and in translation well beyond their culture of origin and are actively present in other cultures through school curricula, university syllabuses, conferences, private and public readings. So are Hikmet's works, translated in over 50 languages.

Damrosch also offers a more structured "threefold definition focused on the world, the text and the reader: 1. World literature as an elliptical refraction of national cultures; 2. World literature as writing that gains in translation; 3. World literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (281), emphasizing on the second and third fold. Literary works circulating through translation invariably gain from the exposure they get in the respective cultures, and this more often than not results in a different reception from that of the culture of origin, formed, among other factors, by the *foreignization* or *domestication* of the translation and the literary expectations of the recipient culture. Discussing the works under consideration is an engagement with the 1920s/ 1930s Romania, 1950s/ 1960s USA and 1970s Bulgaria and as such they are brought together in this text by its structure which compares the autofictional evolution of Sylvia Plath in her prose and poetry to the autofictions of authors with whom she shares major and minor themes and concerns with reference to both her and their lives as lived experience. Through studies like this one literary works receive further illumination both in the original (the Americans) and in translation (the non-American authors) and it will depend only on the circulation of this and similar texts for the less known writers to receive a more permanent prominence through additional translations, readings, and discussions. Damrosch's terms of *hypercanon*, *countercanon* and *shadow canon* referring to well established classics, new bright and fading names are not unlike the lives of stars, with supernovas like Khaled Hosseini and his *The Kite Runner* or J. K. Rowling with her *Harry Potter* series, both already turning into star dust. In this aspect, Plath should be considered a bright star, Sexton somewhat less bright but still going strong, while the other writers in this comparison, like Serghi, will shine brightly only if one comes close to them, being part of a less visible outer space. As for Dubarova, she has yet to make her name in World Literature through good translations, slowly awakening from her posthumous eclipse in her own country.

And again, the question is brought up: "What's in a chestnut tree?" if poems are the fastest track to getting there. This question appears to be naïve given the unfathomable complexity of the numerous factors and their interactions determining the literary life of a writer's

work in a phenomenal sphere whose intricate workings may be likened to the functioning of the universe. This part of the study will attempt to provide an answer with references to judgements made in the previous chapters.

2. The feminine literary selves against a mythological interpretation – Keats's "Lamia"

The very act of recreation and reinvention of oneself through autofiction is a form of mythologizing the self. As the analysis of the authors has shown, it does not have to do so much with a narcissistic exposure of the confessional writer, but rather with an intense exteriorization of obsessive ideas and experiences that have haunted the author, and which are sometimes reproduced with disturbing poignancy. The uncanny attraction such works hold for large audiences is, no doubt, part of this intensity of the relived event in writing manifested in the feminine literary selves under consideration. In her stated desire to be the "girl to be God" at Smith, Plath associated herself with a certain loud projection of the self, which, as we understand from her *Journals*, late poems ("The Beekeeper's Daughter", Chapter 4) and the testimonies of those who knew her closely, did not materialize and so Plath wrote her poems and novel in which she remarkably rendered her often painful interactions with a decade – the 1950s. Sexton employed an often voluptuous literary reincarnation of "the summer queen" in her poems while Serghi and Dubarova managed to make the sunshine and the summer illuminate and warm their intense prose and poetry in the 1920s/1930s and 1970s, respectively. This literary reproduction of the epochs and experiences from the feminine perspective can be likened to a first-person account of Graves's "white goddess" (Chapter 1) in fictional flesh and blood and compared to Keats's presentation of the eternal woman through her presence as a goddess on the earth. Fitzgerald notably does this exercise to all the aplomb and fanfare of the other literary personages of *The Beautiful and the Damned* through Gloria (Lamia) and to a flurry of subsequent comparative analyses of Keats's poem and Fitzgerald's novel. As an undisclosed exercise of such Keatsean feminine projection through the male gaze, we have Daisy from *The Great Gatsby* whose verdict on the 1920s is that a woman should be "a beautiful little fool" (Fitzgerald 16). The autofictional selves of Plath, Sexton, Serghi and Dubarova provide

a much more engaging direct contact with the feminine, being the creations of women, and their literary lives against Keats's portrayal of the eternal woman can serve as a testimony of what these women achieved in their times and how they stand up to mythology in their fictions. With Keats's "Lamia" we have two aspects of the realized feminine – in its presence in the goddess in heaven and its presence in the goddess on the earth who, in fact, lives the life of an ordinary woman. Keats uses the Ancient Greek mythological figure of Lamia who is a child-eating monster and a demon, in earlier versions being the beautiful queen of Libya. Hera forced her to eat the children from her affair with Zeus and afflicted her with permanent insomnia which was alleviated by Zeus's gift for Lamia – the ability to remove her eyes. Keats makes several modifications to the myth and in his version, Lamia appears to be essentially a woman-goddess rather than a permanent zoomorphic creature with woman parts and it is evident that she yearns for her human form.

The goddess in question is introduced by Keats thus: "a nymph, to whom all hoofed Satyrs knelt/ at whose white feet the languid Tritons poured/ Pearls, […] by the springs where she to bathe was wont" (254). The portrayal is through the male consciousness of the author and unsurprisingly his eternal woman is a combination of innocence and seduction. The *nymph* is the object of the wild adoration and undisguised lust on part of the sexually potent *Satyrs*. She is so timid that even in heaven she is a legend and nowhere to be seen. As Hermes looks for her, he finds a garish colored snake whose woman's nature is visible upon a closer look: "She seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf,/ Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self./ Upon her crest she wore a wannish fire/ Sprinkled with stars, like Ariadne's tiar:/ Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!/ She had a woman's mouth with all its pearls complete" (256). And from that mouth come words veiled in sweet seduction. Her eyes from the myth unable to sleep here are made to continuously "weep" (256) in a rhymed invocation of Hera's affliction-curse which is part of the overall sensation of punishment on Lamia – her zoomorphic state of incompletion. Other traits of the feminine are given – both as looks and character: "frail of heart", "loveliness invisible", "Circean head" (257). Since the nymph has been enchanted into a snake, she wants her woman form back. Once

transformed into an earthly woman she is described as "a lady bright,/ A full-born beauty new and exquisite" (259). On earth, she dreams of what her new life could be and lets her dreams mix with the reality of the cities. Thus, in Corinth she sets her eyes upon Lycius. With words she enchants him and then he finds her form irresistible. Lamia thus realizes that not even goddesses compare to the earthly woman: "There is not such a treat among them all,/ Hunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,/ As a real woman, lineal indeed" (263). Lamia throws off the *goddessness* in her lest this part of hers frighten Lycius, but then she becomes as vulnerable to attacks as any other woman. And so, in Corinth Lamia wins not only admiration, but also envy in the likes of the sage Apollonius, Lycius's instructor. Keats provides a memorable description of how love fares in the opening of Part II: "Love in a hut, with water and a crust,/ Is – Love, forgive us! – cinders, ashes, dust;/ Love in a palace is perhaps at last/ More grievous torment than a hermit's fast" (265). According to this enigmatic wording love is unsustainable if deprived of the minimal material requirements for the two persons in love to function, also confirmed in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) where the deserted cabin with its furniture breaking upon the touch proves an impossible choice for the love couple of tramps. In "Lamia" Keats spoke from personal experience with his difficult circumstances – of meagre means aggravated by the forthcoming complications brought on by tuberculosis which made his relationship with Fanny Brawne an impossibility. However, he is quick to question the success of love in a *palace* likening it to *a grievous torment*, suggesting the exposure of the feeling to the eyes of the world with all pertaining detrimental effects. Keats is convinced, like Shakespeare before him in *Romeo and Juliet*, that true love must be unconditional, excluding reasoning: "Because he mused beyond her, knowing well/ That but a moment's thought is passion's passing bell" (266). Keats strongly suggests that marriage is the worst enemy to true passion, something that Lamia knows from her otherworldly knowledge of a goddess. Lycius views his marriage to Lamia as a narcissistic affair of showing off with her as a brilliant trophy: "What mortal hath a prize, that other men/ May be confounded and abashed withal,/ […] Amid the hoarse alarm of the Corinth's voice./ Let my foes choke, and my friends shout afar,/ While through the thronged streets

your bridal car/ Wheels round its dazzling spokes" (267). Lamia accepts with all the misgivings she has and because she is endowed with Keats's *negative capability*[85], "She burnt, she loved the tyranny" (268) in an aesthetics of suffering and sorrow. Lamia's marriage in Corinth signals disaster in her echoing Lycius's invocation of his friends' imagined jubilation: "I have no friends,' said Lamia, 'no, not one;/ My presence in wide Corinth hardly known" (268). Against Lamia's better judgment, Lycius allows Apollonius to join the guests of the wedding. Amid high revelry, the sage exposes Lamia to her true otherworldly self (273) and warns his disciple against becoming "a serpent's prey" (274). Not listening to his advice, Lycius is deadly wounded by the serpent whose conjuring by Apollonius leads to a terrible event: "A serpent!' echoed he; no sooner said,/ Than with a frightful scream she vanished" (274).

The ending of Keats's poem is abrupt, horrifying and certainly ambiguous in ensuring that Lamia cannot be rid of her demon nature despite her renouncing the goddess in her for earthly love and life as an ordinary woman. It may also suggest that a woman needs to be allowed to have her secrets like Barrie's Mrs Darling and that those secrets should be inviolate. Otherwise, the spell will break, and the wonderful transformation will be interrupted with terrible results. The poem is also critical of marriage as an institution as well as of all human vanity and pretense. In that, it is consistent with the English poet's affirmation that pleasure is transient, and every pleasurable moment should be cherished and extended to infinity as demonstrated in many poems, notably in "Hither, Hither, Love", "When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be", and "Endymion". Keats's romantic mind thus realistically excludes the compatibility of true love and any societal arrangements because that would imply a compromise.

Plath's autofictional *bildungsroman* (her literary works as a whole) neatly mirrors Keats's version of Lamia. She emerges from a zoomorphic creature in "Ocean 1212-W" (Chapter 2), having embraced the life of an earthly woman. In her premarital state of a would-be goddess, she is sought after by many prospective gentlemen (most of them physically imperfect – the *Satyrs*) who would be happy to marry

[85] Defined by Keats in a letter from 1817 as the capacity to accept "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" – a. n.

her and whom she rejects (*The Journals*, *The Bell Jar*, Chapter 3). Before the marriage she suffers from insomnia (*The Bell Jar*, Chapter 3) which is manifested in the dark vision of most of her works – prose and poetry through *weeping* revealed as suffering, sorrow, and skepticism. She opts for a god-like man – Ted Hughes (Lycius) in another country – the descent to an unknown world and a city – London/Devon (Corinth) and, like Lamia with Lycius, is able to enjoy her premarital relationship with him ("Ode for Ted", Chapter 4). Her marriage to Hughes provokes the envy and disapprobation of those around Hughes – his family and some of his friends while she, like Lamia, has no friends of her own, and like her, can accept *tyranny* ("The Jailer", Chapter 4). Ironically, here Hughes and Lycius take different paths – he becomes a Zeus-like figure (Lamia's major choice in Ancient Greek Mythology) who has affairs with other women. They suffer like many of the earth women whom Zeus impregnates (Assia Wevill, Chapters 1, 4) while her secret (her depression, Chapters 3, 4) turns against herself into a self-destructive gesture (her suicide, Chapters 1, 4). Lamia's prehistory – her becoming the zoomorphic snake-woman and her consuming her children is realized in a loop at the end of the autofictional evolution of Plath's life – in "Edge" (Chapter 4) where she recedes to vegemorphism and commits infanticide – to be followed in the act by Wevill herself. This striking similarity of the autofictional Plath and Keats's "Lamia" underscores the American poet's archetypal acceptance of patriarchy despite numerous feminist manifestations in her work and suggests that if not in life, in her autofictions Plath *does* manage to be a goddess, perhaps not the one she craved, but the one she became because of her life choices reflected in her works. Undoubtedly these choices were engendered by what Holly Ranger calls "the archetypal figure of feminine rebellion" (34), easily traceable in Greek mythology.

Sexton's fictional projections of herself comparable to Keats's "Lamia" in the analyzed poems here can be found in the American poet's partial identification with the white woman from "Snow White", "Rumpelstiltskin" and "Rapunzel" (Chapter 2), especially in the lustful animals after Snow White (Chapter 2) (the *Satyrs*). They can also be linked to Lamia's promiscuous prehistory – when she was the seductress before she met Keats's Lycius. Her poems also show a

general dissatisfaction with marriage – not Plath's representation of "the private totalitarian state" from *The Bell Jar* (Chapter 3), but rather as an inconvenience to a more liberated feminine self. There is, however, a certain regret that she has divorced (her late poems, Chapter 2). In her famous "Rowing" (Chapter 2), she departs from everything material and sexual in a "marriage" to an all accepting masculine God who does not flaunt his sexuality. As such Sexton's poetry is freer of patriarchal myths than Plath, celebratory of female sexuality and self-awareness. We have a similar disapprobation of marriage in Cella Serghi as well, but it is related to her being married to a man she does not love (Chapters 3, 4). Unlike with Plath, she has the husband's family against her only in the beginning, so that does not play a crucial role to the marriage dissolution. The relationship to Keats's "Lamia" is the breaking of a secret – ironically, on part of the husband – that he is also poor, as well as in Serghi's coquettish behavior which keeps potential candidates for her hand hooked (Chapter 4) (the *Satyrs*). As with Plath, they are rejected (Chapter 3), but for another reason – their not being familiar with Serghi's secret – that she is penniless (*The Spider's Web*, Chapters 3, 4) – poverty as the vice that the mercantile Bucharest society of the 1920s/ 1930s is guilty of propagating. Dubarova has an early partial relationship with Keats's work – in the zoomorphic transformation to the man-fish from "A Sea Tale" (Chapter 2) and a point of contact in a late one – in the feminine seduction from "Jealousy" (Chapter 2).

While all four women writers can be related to parts from Keats's "Lamia" only the autofictional Plath closely mirrors the story so the results with the other compared autofictive writers in this aspect are inconclusive. She was the only one to declare that she wanted to be "the girl to be God" (Chapter 1) and was the only one to have a strong reflection in Keats's tragic tale. The other female projections, from Sexton, Serghi and Dubarova, including those of Plath's, are empowered feminine selves who through autofiction were able to inscribe themselves in their respective epochs as well as make poignant comments on these epochs.

3. The power of autofiction and *écriture feminine*: "The Laugh of the Medusa" vs the works by Plath, Sexton, Dubarova and Serghi

The term *écriture feminine* translated in English as "women's writing" was invented by the French literary theorist born in Algeria, Hélène Cixous, and refers to the relationship between the cultural and psychological inscription of the female body and female difference into language and text, which makes the writing of women differ from men's writing. The subject has seen the names of many theorists, most notably Luce Irigaray, Catherine Clemént, the Bulgaria born Julia Kristeva and further developed by Bracha Ettinger. As a theory, it capitalizes on the importance of language for the psychic understanding of self and accounts for the specific expression and choice of words by women writers, but also by men who may consciously or unconsciously adopt certain elements of it. In that it aims at expressing the feminine through text in an essentialism of the woman and does not inscribe itself with ease within the framework of feminism which is a social construct. Gender-based, the term suggests that writing can be indicative of the sex of the writers, or it may be revelatory of their association with a specific gender and as such it can also transcend genders. In that it can also explain certain perceived failures in authenticity – for example Iris Murdoch's portrayal of men from the first-person perspective in several novels where they come out as effeminate. But it can only serve to explain or suggest, usually not to criticize, since Plath also found Lowell not masculine enough and that was only her perception. (By contrast, Sexton considered him attractive, so she regretted his not letting her closer to him, but, as it has been shown, Sexton had a larger range of sexual preferences.) If we know what qualifies feminine writing or *écriture feminine*, we will be able to decide if certain writing as too masculine and sometimes even dismiss it from the point of view of the modern reader who is accustomed to a bigger gender fluidity both in writing and in life. The problem with loud masculine writing is that machismos will make themselves felt in the text and indeed that will be at a subconscious level which will render the writer unaware of the real issue. These considerations can certainly explain the sad waning of former greats such as Heller, Bukowski, and Miller. Belonging to different epochs of active writing, the trite mannerisms associated with

postmodernism and modernism, respectively, cannot be the main reason since these authors also wrote in a manner that made them free of most of them. The point is that we still read writers from the 1920s and 1930s such as Mihail Sebastian, Anton Holban and Theodore Dreiser, or the plays by Tennessee Williams from the 1940s for that matter. Far from being gender-fluid, both male and female characters in them read as human beings of flesh and blood whom the reader may wish to get to know and in all of them, we can observe the male writer taking a stance supporting the opposite sex. Especially commendable in this aspect is Sebastian's experimental *Women* (*Femei*) (1933) where in one of the novellas the author masterfully writes from the perspective of a woman, or *Ioana* (1935) by Holban, where the writer constructs a real dialog of equality between the sexes set in interwar Kavarna, reminiscent of modern iterations such as the film *Before Sunset* (2004). Praise should also go to Sebastian's *The Town with Acacia Trees* (*Orașul cu salcâmi*) (1935) for the highly unusual for the time sympathetic portrayal of a lesbian who gets married, and, in the novel, this is indeed a tragic rather than comic situation. The same principle holds true also with Romanian writers such as Drumeș, Ibrăileanu and Mihăescu, but as a negative label – their strident masculinity now makes them unattractive not only to female readers but also to male ones and to the point that their attempts to eulogize the woman and put her on a pedestal come across as irremediable patriarchism. Even a writer such as Hemingway has fallen victim to his masculinity in writing. From the same perspective and by the same criterion, a literary giant such as Fitzgerald with 300 million copies of *The Great Gatsby* sold in the USA alone, and especially with this classic of his, will have all women identifying with Daisy come across as those "beautiful little fools". If we use Damrosch's canon division, we could relate all these machismo writers to the *shadow canon* or fading stars in the sky. Their works were bestsellers once, now they stand as valuable testimonies of an epoch with its social norms and mores, as well as attestations to non-transcending fiction, being kept alive as World Literature through selective university curricula or translations. The sensitivity of *écriture feminine* to language would yield a fruitful study of gender in a book by Cecilia Ștefănescu *Lovesick* (*Legături bolnăvicioase*), also a major film from 2006. A solid exploration of the feminine self in a manner

attractive to both sexes is at the core of TV series such as *Orphan Black* (2013-2017), *Killing Eve* (2018-2022) and *You* (2018-). A thought-provoking recent film with a transgender thematic is *The Garden Left Behind* (2019), as well as the TV series *I May Destroy You* (2020-) and *Dispatches from Elsewhere* (2020-).

In her highly influential article from 1976 entitled "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous writes: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (875). The urge for women to project themselves into text and thus into the world Cixous relates to the *inexhaustible women's imaginary* (876). The French theorist advises us that women can be excellent observers and meticulous self-analysts of everything that affects them including their "erotogeneity" (876) for which, we must agree, the most natural genre appears to be life writing with its respective modes. She proceeds by asking women to actively share their experiences with the others, thus possibly arriving at a total which would be the accumulated perception of "the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naiveté, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism" (876). Cixous's concern is with the same father figure who also becomes the woman's husband, as in Plath's case, and effectively instates "the private totalitarian state" which is marriage as seen in *The Bell Jar* (Chapter 3). Cixous is against any women's secrets in writing which she links to *guilty masturbation* and relates it to women's not *going all the way* (877) in their writing, not sharing everything. Her call for *écriture feminine* summons the appearance of "female-sexed texts" (877) which would shatter the *smug-faced* image of the reading public and what she terms the "imbecilic capitalist machinery" (877), all exacting some outdated Victorian decorum from women while exerting lenience and condescension to the produced results – the "other Victorians", as Foucault was memorably to remark (Chapter 3). In this aspect Sexton was more than willing to oblige, suffusing her poems with the highly unacceptable *masturbation, menstruation, abortion, adultery, incest,* and *drug addiction* to boot, all written in the 1960s (Chapter 2), thus

preceding and anticipating the article under consideration by almost a decade. Serghi, as it was shown, had to fight patriarchalism in the 1930s on more than one front – receiving patronizing advice from male writing dignitaries on how to deal with her major autofiction *The Spider's Web* (Chapter 4). Dubarova, likewise, was coached by male poets in the 1970s, so her fresh self-asserting voice was effectively silenced before her death (Chapter 2). Last, but not least, Plath herself was lectured on poetry by Hughes and *Ariel* was the angry response to male oppression and pent-up feelings (Chapters 1, 4), leading to the *outburst* that Cixous speaks of in her article. It must be said that Plath, Sexton and Serghi, being more mature than Dubarova and living in more liberated societies, were able to rebel in their lifetimes and see their work published while the Bulgarian poet had her own rebellion mainly against school as an oppressive institution without hoping that this work of hers would see print (Chapter 2).

In an obvious reference to the XY chromosome combination which determines the male sex, as well as an allusion to the sexual act where man identifies with his sexual organ and upon penetration into the woman feels lost and alone in her as in a "dark continent" (877), Cixous asks man to open his eyes and see himself clearly as regards his "masculinity and femininity" (877). The theorist thus suggests that men should take an informed stance on their own sexuality and attitude towards women based on true knowledge of women's sexuality, which should be beneficial for both men and women. Woman is thus seen by Cixous as the "Great Unknown" for men: "because you are Africa, you are black" (877). Uninformed and afraid, man is prone to make mistakes in his comportment with women with dire consequences for both sexes. Cixous, however, suggests that certain men want to remain ignorant and use their little knowledge of women for exercising control over them even with the help of other women thus constructing "the infamous logic of antilove" (878). Cixous, originating herself from Africa, identifies all women with the black color: "we are black and we are beautiful" (878) and we should recall that in the analysis both Sexton and Plath have offered a rather positive synesthesia as regards the black color and their feminine selves (Chapter 2), a possible unconscious association with "the dark continent" Cixous speaks of with regards to experiencing men's perceived ignorance. The critic also insists on a

term she calls "*marked* writing" (879) – that is a kind of masculine writing which consciously perpetuates woman's repression (879) and if there are men who are guilty of this crime, they really should be ashamed of themselves. But the opposite is also true, feminist writing from the likes of Kate Millett with *Sexual Politics* (1970) (also diagnosed with bipolar disorder), Robin Morgan's "Arraignment" (1972), Andrea Dworkin with *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981) and *Intercourse* (1987), including Cixous herself in this article and other writings, can hardly be called *unmarked*. While remaining key works for Second-wave feminism and having performed a huge role in opening peoples' eyes – both men's and women's, they, on the whole, tend to attack men on basis of their masculine anatomy, transmogrifying them to monsters, even calling for their *castration*, and while certainly, as far as feminism is concerned, ignorance could hardly be called bliss, both sexes need to learn as much as possible about the *other* before we turn into Le Guin's darkly descriptive *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). In the novel the humanoids of the planet Gethen alternate their sex but alongside with the disappearance of wars and violence, there is a heavy collateral: "the elimination of gender and the consequent lack of reciprocal appreciation of *virility* in men and *femininity* in women" (Boev[86]). All four women writers under consideration, as evidenced, have demonstrated their appreciation of men's virility while enjoying their own femininity in this binary with the man of their affections – Plath (*The Journals*, the *Letters*, certain poems, Chapters 3, 4), Sexton (the poems, Chapter 2), Serghi (*The Spider's Web*, Chapter 4), Dubarova (*The Journal*, certain short stories, and poems, Chapter 2).

In her article, Cixous calls *écriture feminine* "*insurgent* writing" (880) because through writing her *self*, woman will be able to reclaim her own story and by returning to her body she will be able to have back what Cixous terms "her immense bodily territories" (880) as well as absolve herself from guilt (880) and all four women writers subscribe easily to it. Especially prominent are Plath, Sexton and Serghi, with

[86] See "What if Yin and Yang Were One? Feminism Seen through the Prism of Bisexuality in *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula Le Guin" https://liternet.bg/publish9/hboev/feminism.htm – a. n.

Plath's and Serghi's linguistic experimentations including *stream of consciousness* (Plath, *The Journals*, Serghi, *The Spider's Web*, Chapters 2, 3, 4), all four – an accent on fashion and food across their works, especially Plath, Sexton and Serghi (Chapters 2, 3). Apart from domesticity in all four, we also have scenes of the *flaneuse* and her perception of the city (Chapters 2, 3). The 'R' rating for sexual content and violence goes to Sexton for some of her poems, and to Plath for *The Bell Jar* (Chapters 2, 3). There is no such rating for Serghi, but her open discussion of woman's sexuality and pleasure in the 1930s Romania is even more striking than Plath's and Sexton's more explicit intimations from the 1950s and 1960s America (Chapters 3, 4). Dubarova was too young to write in such a bold manner, but some of her poems, *Journal* entries and short stories show that this part of women's writing was not foreign to her (Chapter 2).

For Cixous there is a clear distinction between *masculine* and *feminine* writing and in her figurative style of memorable metaphors she gives the following illustrated definition: "writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death" (883). For her, the process of probing the self and its self-expression and then reproducing the woman's body in its sensations, perceptions and sexuality will determine if we have a case of feminine writing. Cixous also links woman's perception in collective mentality to "horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss" (885) and goes on to claim that this mythologizing of the woman in literature and popular opinion has led to the creation of yet another myth – that of the *dark continent* (884) which is unexplored only because everyone was convinced that it was unexplorable, being too dark (885). The laugh of the Medusa is then the feminine monster laughing back at a world that was supposed to enjoy themselves mocking at it for its perceived inadequacies and guilts. On mythological ground Cixous is certainly close to the truth – feminized myths portray zoomorphic creatures which are even more frightening, but also no less fascinating than their male counterparts. It is enough to think of Keats's "Lamia" and against this article by the French critic we can read the poem as woman trying to demythologize herself by renouncing on her being a goddess and thus on being hateful to herself in her snake-woman body. However, she is

not allowed to continue functioning as an earthly woman free of myth by the male authority (the sage Apollonius). While in Corinth she has no history, but this is to be preferred to the inscrutable enigma (the Dark Continent). Lycius is effectively killed by Apollonius, his instructor, for disobeying him and allowing himself the alliance with the demythologized woman, who conjures up the mythological transformation. Once accepted as reality, myths become real, so Lamia is real enough to deliver a poisonous wound, if she is perceived as such – the same idea is propounded in Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) and from there in the film *The Matrix*. This reading of Keats confirms Cixous's claims of men creating and perpetuating women's myths, continually casting new shrouds over parts of the *dark continent*. The urge, therefore, by the critic, for women to demythologize themselves occurs time and again in *feminine writing* with women disrobing themselves of the eternal magical cloak thrown over their shoulders by men writers – of *la femme fatale*. This mythical dangerous woman is especially present in Romanian interwar literature. Almost all men writers from the period, mentioned in this study, created their classical novels on this myth, the most notable ones being M. Eliade's *Marriage in Heaven* (*Nunta în cer*) (1938), G. Mihăescu's *Donna Alba* (1935) and the *Russian Woman* (1933), Drumeș's *Invitation to Waltz* (1939), G. Ibrăileanu's *Adela* (1933), I. Teodoreanu's *Lorelei* (1935), and C. Petrescu's *The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War* (1930). There are Bulgarian counterparts as well – *Lieutenant Bentz* (*Поручик Бенц*) (1938) and *Doomed Souls* (*Осъдени души*) (1945) by Dimitar Dimov. Emiliyan Stanev's *The Peach Thief* (*Крадецът на праскови*) (1948) is a remarkable double image creation – both of the *femme fatale* through the eyes of the others, and of the downtrodden feminine soul trampled upon by domestic tyranny. The American novels from that period certainly have Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a prime example of the *femme fatale* but like Stanev's case, Daisy Buchanan is almost identical to her Bulgarian counterpart in her doubleness. It should be noted that the American examples are not many and perhaps that is the reason why in this aspect Fitzgerald's novel stands out so much.

From the earlier period, Serghi's Diana, we can say, is a mistress of both mythologizing herself for the others, or rather not dispelling the

myths, and being a girl and then a woman, completely devoid of myth in her domestic environments (Chapter 3). Novels on the interwar period by modern Romanian female writers keep demystifying the woman, notably Ioana Pârvulescu's *Life Begins on Friday* (*Viața începe vineri*) (2009) and *The Future Begins on Monday* (*Viitorul începe luni*) (2012). Plath's Esther acts in an identical manner, with both authors' autofictional selves laughing the laugh of the Medusa at the men trying to figure them out (Chapter 3). Sexton is the least mythological in her autofictions, we could say that she was simply not interested in playing to the public imagination (Chapter 2). Dubarova portrays herself as unsure of her womanly charms and being only 17 at the time of her death, we can easily understand why that was so (Chapter 2). Out of the four women authors Plath and Serghi created *l'homme fatal* (Chapter 4) as a counteract of mythologizing the other sex and here we must point out Serghi's meticulous recreation of the sea God – Alex/ Petre (Chapter 4), which remains an enduring attractive image for the female readers as are the numerous portrayals of the elusive *femme fatale* for men. Cixous thus suggests the presence of "a signifier within the discourse of man, that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds" (887). What she means is that the woman character is reflected in the eyes of man and uttered through his perceptions in his rendition of a masculine narrative. It is hard to disagree with Cixous, that is indeed the way female characters fare in men's writing and oftentimes so do women in men's lives. One would wish that we could see much more from Daisy (*The Great Gatsby*) or Roberta (*An American Tragedy*). With Adela from the eponymous work by Ibrăileanu we see a lot of the woman, but we are never sure if she is not a figment of the narrator's imagination. Still, the opposite is not always different: Jane Austin's male characters are forever being called off to London at the last moment when we could learn something substantial about them. Charlotte Brontë's representation of Rochester with his scant presence on the page almost turns him into a ghost of his own castle, perhaps as a revenge out of woman's solidarity for the locked-up Bertha (Antoinette Cosway). It is through Jean Rhys's postmodernist representation of Brontë's gothic character in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) that he obtains substance. In this line of the discourse, it should

be said that it is not impossible for a male writer to place a woman at the very center of the action – L. Rebreanu with *Embers* (1934) where everything is perceived, imagined, and reacted to from the perspective of the main character, Liana, with men (dis)appearing as much at random as with Austin. Far from being the silent presence, which is Adela in Ibrăileanu's novel, Liana is portrayed in palpable flesh and blood, so that we can witness every vivid moment of her tragedy – falling yet another victim to patriarchal mores. In that Rebreanu could be considered a feminist, not only because he allots such substantial literary space for a female character, but also because he manages to fill that space with minute details testifying to an authentic reproduction of the life of an intelligent young Romanian girl in the capital.

Male writers have sided with women not once in literature. An early feminist could be considered Daniel Defoe with his sympathetic portrayal of women and from their perspective in *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1775). This male feminism is also manifested in the choices Defoe's female characters make which favor them, inconsiderate of the men concerned, and going to that extent is indeed remarkable. Another famous example is Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) where the author succeeds in his feminist crusade arguably even more than Defoe, rendering much more intricately the psychological and physical strain, as well as bubbling emotions that the female protagonist goes through, writing again from a first-person perspective. A World Literature all-time classic with considerable attention paid to a woman by a male writer is Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878). Women writers, however, are by no means expected to reciprocate their male colleagues' gentlemanly concessions. Not by Cixous, or by any other militant feminist, who urges women to write about themselves and themselves alone and share with other women – the *signifier* from men's discourse which is to be extracted and given new *true* meanings.

Ecriture feminine, although sounding like a call to arms against men and their writing, is undoubtedly a term with an unclear definition, since it allows gender-transcending, and has a solid presence with numerous powerful manifestations. Conceived by Cixous as a reaction to masculine writing which is more ordered, it presupposes a reflection of woman's bodily impulses, hence the multiple references to woman's *vast bodily presence*. It also entails an exploration of that territory by

women and recreation of the findings through writing which should be consistent with the French understanding of *jouissance*, and which excludes masculine writing proper since the term involves the reflections of the body to multiple orgasms, which can be observed in the speech of women, not men since the way they speak reflects their sexuality or as Luce Irigaray states in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977):

> But *woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*. She finds pleasure almost everywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined […] "She" is definitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious… not to mention her language, in which "she" sets off in all directions leaving "him" unable to discern the coherence of any meaning (28-9).

In this key work for Second-wave feminism Irigaray delineates the many differences between male and female anatomy which predetermine very different behavioral and speech patterns in women to be reflected in feminine writing. With these clarifications, there are male writers that have written and write in this manner, writers that come closer to reproducing *la jouissance* in text. The names from this study are Guibert and du Duve (Chapter 3), with the latter even more so. Holban has such frolicsome literary moments in *A Death That Proves Nothing* (1931) and that text can be qualified as feminine writing; the same can be observed in *Ioana* but with somewhat lesser intensity (Chapter 3).

The main authors from this study, as already shown in this and in much more detail in the previous chapters, all inscribe themselves within the framework of *écriture feminine* as proposed by Cixous. Their writings have all the necessary psycholinguistic ingredients, especially found in their poetry, but also prose where rhythmic irregularities suggestive of *jouissance* can be discovered in Plath, Sexton, Serghi and Dubarova. Since they all wrote unaware of the term and its immense influence and followers, the study also confirms that Cixous coined it to describe an existing phenomenon. Many female writers have contributed with new developments of women's writing, most notably

Duras with her *L'Amant* and *Hiroshima mon amour* where she pursued high elegance and sonority reflected in her critique *Ecrire* (1993).

By experimenting with colors and rhythms expressed through their autofictional selves, comprising a large spectrum of topics, often deep psychology, and no secrets for the readers while employing a different meter of common decency, Plath, Sexton, Serghi and Dubarova created excellent examples of feminine writing which can only gain in appropriate translation given the high-quality artistic content in the original. All four authors responded to their inner urge to write provocatively, exploring, and mapping the changing vast geographies of their bodies and minds against their respective epochs and this study has found numerous points of contact in a personal mode of writing that unites women from different places, even continents, and holds fascinating challenges for readers from all sexes and genders.

4. "The World Republic of Letters" and smaller literary spaces (Bulgarian and Romanian) – decolonizing the Eurocentric model

Another major contributor to World Literature theory is Pascale Casanova with her classical reference *The World Republic of Letters* (*La republique mondiale des lettres*) (1999). This French scholar uses Fernand Braudel's ideas of large-scale socioeconomic factors as being influential on making and writing history to discuss world literature processes. Thus, she speaks of "world literary space" (82) which fills the "World Republic of Letters" built after the model of a state and which evolves through history, goes through periods of war and violence, has its revolutions, and changes its capital due to the respective literary processes in action within this space. According to Casanova these processes can be affected by politics but are rather culturally determined subject to a combination of national and international dynamics of support (or lack thereof) of literature through production and translation, resulting in what she calls "literary capital" (13). Casanova builds up an argument around a Eurocentric model where "the richest spaces are also the oldest" (82), thus linking Western European literary traditions and the respective geographical areas to *literary capital* which is at the core of World Literature, and which results from "the uneven distribution of resources among national

literary spaces" (83). In her "republic" the boundaries of the countries do not correspond to the confines of the literary state itself, but cities such as Paris, London, Munich have been its capital and the regions around them have enjoyed a *centric* position, relegating other regions and literatures to the "periphery". Another important relationship in Casanova's "republic" is the trialectic of state – national literature – language (34). In her model, international historically dominant languages in the different epochs such as Greek, Latin, English, German, and French have also determined the expansion of the literary works written in these languages both in the original and in translation beyond their culture of origin, explaining how from national they have become international classics (83). Since this French critic, like Damrosch, is describing a global phenomenon, this also explains why certain other works written in languages from the *periphery* have never made it to the status of international (universal) classics, even if we examine them next to a classical work from the "major" languages and cultures to discover that they are every bit as universal, moving, engaging, and fascinating, or perhaps, even more. This is usually the job of the translator who offers a literary work to the attention of the publisher by providing a brief review in the language of the proposed translation. Despite all the merits of the work in question, fully realized only in the head of the translator at this juncture, its translation may be rejected by the publisher in view of the literary reception at that moment, print and distribution costs and other factors that may exist only in his or her own head. Sometimes even generous subsidies from the source nation may not tempt the implacable publisher who may have a vision of printed copies in the thousands, especially if the said work is to be published in one of the *centric* nations and into a *dominant* language, if we use Casanova's terminology. From the multitude of factors at play that will determine the destiny of a translation a visible one is related to the national literary awards the work has reaped. And in the event that there are few or none – due to a number of other extraliterary factors such as nepotism, favoritism and other *isms* from the source nation, typically so rife in the so called "periphery", the fate of the translation, hence the life of the work in World Literature is sealed. That is, the long winding road that a work from a *peripheral* language has to traverse to reach its prospective public in the

Eurocentric language. And even if it does manage to obtain the subsidized translation, the big issue remains with convincing the reader from the *centric* nation that the book actually merits even in a "perfect" translation with all its universality and "otherworldly" fascination because alongside them immanently there will inevitably be many regionalist allusions and representations of *peripheral* culture referents that will not be speaking much to those readers and then no negotiation of the *domestication* or *foreignization* of the translation will be of any real help. There is also the sensibility in the literary work, which is often nation- or region-based, and then the further the source nation from the *centric* nation, the harder it will be for the readers to stomach it in translation. One may say, that if this is true, then the opposite should also be in effect – how *centric* literary works are received by *peripheral* reading publics. That, however, is not the case because in this situation we have a *centric* literary work written in a *dominant* language circulating within the "republic" in a (post)colonial literary space which roughly reflects the actual former colonial expansion of the respective language and nation state once. There is a reading reception which is already operational and translated French, English and American works of fiction typically receive much more reading and critical attention in countries such as Bulgaria and Romania than literary works from these countries would receive in the respective *centric* nations.

One would think that neighboring *peripheral* nations might not have so many problems with receiving a translated literary work from across the national border, and this may indeed be the case, but it will be determined on basis of the political relations between these two nations and the existing reading reception – politics here matter much more than in the center. Exceptions are made to authors such as Pamuk, Hikmet and Șafak since their World status is sufficiently prestigious to warrant an interest in Bulgaria – that is, they enter the Bulgarian reading market in translation not so much as representatives of Turkish literature but as laureates of World Literature and are treated accordingly. Of assistance for the higher profile of Turkish culture in general and literature by association, is the regular airing of Turkish TV series on Bulgarian TV channels. Although invariably soap operas, they keep the perception of Turkishness in Bulgarian public spaces alive. After all, the general perception of Turkey as a "wonderful bridge"

between East and West (Çandar 183) has its fruitful soil in Bulgaria as well. The creation of reading reception for Romanian literature in Bulgaria through its most notable representatives and lesser names has been relatively successful with a huge bulk of Romanian classical and modern writers in recent translations, book presentations and public talks also with the active participation of the author of this study. The supported promotion of this literature via ICR (Romanian Cultural Institute) and Traduki mainly has paid off. Unfortunately, the opposite cannot be said of Bulgarian writers in Romania, the very few known modern names being Georgi Gospodinov and Alek Popov.

With occult and motivational writing giving recipes for modern miracles or offering the daily dose of escapism, alongside the biographies of popular politicians and sports figures filling the windows and shelves of the bookstores in Bulgaria plus a solid monthly dose of literary nationalism, high quality literature may seem to be on the decline. But that is not so. One just needs to look a bit deeper and a walk about the recesses of the big bookstores will offer everything else. The stores themselves seem to reflect the psychology and profundity of the reader by inviting them to explore their nooks and crannies. Online shopping for books offers the possibility to make an order from the convenience of the home. Either way should suffice if one wants to find Sylvia Plath or Cella Serghi in Bulgarian and while with Plath most people know what they are looking for, with Serghi one needs to be informed before making the search. The presentations of the book in translation in both Bulgaria and Romania in 2020 and 2021 have been rewarding, with passages being read out loud and even dramatized by school students. Of help has also been the fact that the author is partially Bulgarian as well as that in representing the epoch and the movements of her family, alongside with the Romanians and Romanian places, she also represented the Bulgarians and Bulgarian places the way she saw them[87]. As the translator of the book, I can only hope that the respite from COVID-19 restrictions will continue long enough for more presentations to become possible.

With that said, we can draw the outlines of the Romanian literary space in how it differs from its Bulgarian counterpart. First and

[87] See Boev, Hristo. *The Different Dobruja in the Literature between the Wars. – a. n.*

foremost, it is thicker with events, the bookstores are bigger and more prominently present in the big cities. So are the antiquarian shops. Books and authors are discussed actively during long cultural programs over the radio and on TV. The bookstores themselves organize such meetings and when the restrictions allow it, the places welcome all participants with the protection measures respected. More young and middle-aged people are actively involved in such events and literary festivals such as FILIT before the pandemic did wonders to bring together authors and translators mainly from Europe and America turning effectively, for a week in October, Romanian into a truly international language and Iași into the unrecognized literary capital of the Balkans with regular guests from France attending – the annual Goncourt winners, renowned authors and intellectuals filled huge halls providing public lectures. Special guests such as the Nobel prize winners Svetlana Alexievich and Olga Tokarczuk have also honored the event. A recent guest in 2018 to FILIT was Jonathan Franzen. The biggest difference, it seems, is the active presence of literature in the public spaces, as well as the continual creation of literary events so that they are really part of people's everyday lives.

By contrast, in Bulgaria literary events such as the International Book Fair in Sofia or "Plovdiv Reads" tend to be annual. Airtime for literature is much more reduced and if events need to be organized, outside the big ones, they are usually scheduled after other public events such as the elections or the school proms for instance, perhaps for fear that books might steal their thunder. Overall, Bulgarian literary space is more static and rarefied, reading uninformed and solitary, which allows for the proliferation of escapist and pseudo-historicist literature in the Age of Post-truth. That does not mean that Bulgarian literary space will always be underdeveloped by comparison to its northern neighbor. Good practices for encouraging active reading should be implemented, with the necessary changes to the school programs to accommodate more writers from what can be perceived as *different Bulgarian literature* – the writers mentioned here and others. More engagement is also necessary with literary works from our neighbors, as well as with World Literature classics. The loss of shine and prestige by numerous world classics due to perceived racism (Chapter 2) gives many chances for the *peripheral* literatures to prove themselves on more democratic

principles of gender tolerance, promotion of inter- and multiculturalism and universality while preserving the regional flair of the works and this concerns both the Bulgarian and the Romanian literary spaces. Perhaps therein lies the answer to the chestnut tree question.

This study has positioned two less-known writers in their own countries – Dubarova and Serghi next to two well-known names of American and World Literature – Plath and Sexton, allowing their texts to speak for themselves in comparison, offering a minute examination of key moments from the autofictional representations of all four writers with an accent on Plath, thus tracing links to common experiences in different epochs and political regimes. The significant number of overlapping points in Plath, Serghi and Dubarova (Chapters 2, 3, 4) challenges the claims made by Casanova about the Eurocentric model of her "World Republic of Letters" and exposes its invisible side – the periphery. Her socioeconomic terminology is useful in establishing the material dimensions of a fantastical world which effectuates transformations in society by transforming each one of us first. As the critic herself intimates, "great writers have managed, by gradually detaching themselves from historical and literary forces, to invent their literary freedom, which is to say the conditions of the autonomy of their work" (xiii). In that, as shown in the analysis, the four female writers have succeeded, while still preserving their relation to *Dasein* (being in their time), thus inviting further comparisons on similar or other criteria, leaving, as Serghi proposes, the interpretation of their works and evaluation of their achievements to the specialists, with the literary selves transcending the books and the epochs.

5. Conclusion

This study has been a voyage on the fictional seas created by the four female writers under consideration. The confines have been established by the respective states and epochs but accosting at different ports during the travel back in time has yielded a wealth of knowledge which has resulted in mapping the transatlantic connections while denoting certain differences.

Positioning Sylvia Plath as the primary author of this study has sustained the inquiries into the feminist discourse associated with her writings. The unwaning interest in her works, as well as the ever-

increasing critical acclaim world-wide, have made her one of the most fascinating writers of World Literature. Her controversial life and works involve rebelling against her Age but also complying with it, thus the author emerges as a woman of all time. The autofictional *bildungsroman* of her represented lived experience through her examined literary works presents an enchanting world whose points of contention call for new deconstructivist approaches.

In its examination of key moments of Plath's life and respective autofictions, this study has compared her to Anne Sexton, Cella Serghi and Petya Dubarova, thus providing yet another bridge between the two Bostonians while relating them to the much less known authors from Romania and Bulgaria, respectively. The proposed exploration of patriarchalism, feminism, versatility and universality in Plath has confirmed strong points of contact with the three other writers. The comparisons to the other major confessionalists in America from the 1950s and 1960s such as Snodgrass, Berryman, Ginsberg, and Lowell have established the position of Plath as the promising young poet who ambitiously pursues the honing of her craft. Further comparisons with autofictive writers of disease such as Solzhenitsyn, Guibert, Blecher and du Duve have determined the scientific interest of the authors, but also their fragile humanity, writing at the edge of their powers, aiming to transcend not only the lethal illness but also the very words themselves. This juxtaposition has revealed that Plath is an author widely cited by both literary studies and medical reference books in an attestation to her marvelously succeeding on both fronts. The discourse, based on close readings of texts by the mentioned authors and comparative cultural discussions involving other authors, titles and texts, has explored kinships of transatlantic leitmotifs and represented disease in literature, aiming to delineate a bigger culturological picture while still allowing the reader to experience the analyzed texts and have glimpses of the life and works of the authors.

The childhood by the sea uniting Plath, Sexton, Dubarova and Serghi has been shown to be magical through their early works and later revisits in fiction. Very important are the transformations that their feminine selves undergo, mixing fairy tales with reality. In that there are many similarities, but also differences owing to the different political regimes in which the writers lived. With three of them

surviving to adulthood, their marriage has been examined against First- and Second-wave feminism, respectively, to trace Serghi's and Plath's engagement with these movements. Marriage finishes badly for both. However, it is Plath who suffers more for it due to her returning severe depression and so she ends her own life as were to do Sexton and Dubarova in the 1970s.

By comparing the lives and autofictions of the four female writers, the study has also examined their defensive mechanisms and the parameters of their revolt against the respective regimes and social mores. The transatlantic dialogues effectuated through the comparative analysis act not only as an exchange of feminine experience but also as available solutions to identical or similar problems which may have appeared insoluble in the respective epoch. By bringing two writers from the Balkan peninsula into the discourse, this study aspires to be part of the decolonization project which challenges Eurocentric stances and seeks arriving at *epistemic disobedience.* Through the comparative analysis the study has illuminated literatures and authors whose lives and works should be better known worldwide because their literary achievements are comparable to those of the great names. Yet Plath's adolescent desire to be romantically involved with someone from the East only suggests that she would probably approve of the approach. It is the author's hope that this study will encourage future research.

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Hristo Boev

FEMININE SELVES IN SYLVIA PLATH'S PROSE AND POETRY: THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMPARED LIVED EXPERIENCE IN FICTION

First edition

Reviewers: *Prof. Ludmilla Kostova, Ph. D.*
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Navigating Sylvia Plath's fictional seas, I have entered the realms of comparisons with other writers and cultures. The confines have been established by the respective states and epochs but accosting at the different ports during the voyage back in time has resulted in establishing transatlantic connections which bring the American poet closer to us, yet our region, I believe, loses a bit of its touch with the European periphery. Experiencing Plath's autofictions alongside those of Anne Sexton, Cella Serghi and Petya Dubarova reveals yet again the power of women's writing and presents the universality of the authors' exceptional texts. In my discussions of them I have challenged certain conceptions and hope to have offered ideas for future research.

the Author

Bringing together several years of meticulous research in American Studies and some of the literatures of South-East Europe, Hristo Boev's monograph *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction* addresses key questions of femininity and creativity from a comparative perspective. The text calls on the insights of a variety of important theorists, from the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to representatives of the Second Wave of Feminism. On the whole, this is an ambitious study of Plath's writing, and the parallels with South-East European writers that Boev draws challenge us to re-think our ideas of an author whose legacy lives on.

Ludmilla Kostova

